

Portrait of His Excellency



By the same Author

- THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY
NAMESAKES
MAGIC QUEST
SUPERSTITION
THE WAY OF THE PHOENIX
PANDORA'S BOX AND OTHER STORIES
BEYOND HELL
DERMOTTS RAMPANT
THE CAST-IRON DUKE
THE REDEMPTION OF MORLEY DARVILLE
HAPPY ENDING
THE DATCHLEY INHERITANCE
THE SHADOW OF GUY DENVER
THE UNBURIED DEAD
THE REALISTS—
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(2) THE SECRETARY OF STATE
(3) DUE RECKONING
THE OLDEST GOD
AN AFFAIR OF HONOUR
TALES OF INTRIGUE AND REVENGE
TO-MORROW AND TO-MORROW
VINDICATION
THE COMMANDMENT OF MOSES
SOLILOQUY
THE CONFESSIONS OF A WELL-MEANING WOMAN
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SONIA MARRIED
MIDAS AND SON
NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE
SONIA
THE SIXTH SENSE
SHEILA INTERVENES
THE RELUCTANT LOVER
BY INTERVENTION OF PROVIDENCE
TEX: A CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS
WHILE I REMEMBER

STEPHEN MCKENNA

*Portrait of His
Excellency*

A Novel



London

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) Ltd.

Made and Printed in Great Britain at
The Mayflower Press, Plymouth. William Brendon & Son, Ltd.

TO
R. L. W.

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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

“ALSTER, 3RD VISCOUNT . . .

I

THE Custance portrait of “*His Excellency the Lord Alster, G.C.M.G., Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia*”, has a better chance of survival than perhaps its artistic merits warrant in that it is the only painting—photographs apart, I believe it is the only representation—of a man who lived to his middle fifties, gave thirty years to the public service, rose to the highest position in it and, when his health began to fail, retired from it with signal marks of his sovereign’s favour and a petition from the people whom he had ruled that his statue or picture, commissioned by public subscription, should forthwith adorn the federal capital.

It is perhaps natural enough that, with the original hanging in Canberra and a replica in London, Lord Alster should have resisted the invitation of his old school to sit again, in a doctor’s robes, or to join the select company of proconsuls on the walls of his old college. He had come home to die; and the most welcome recognition that Eton, Magdalen or the Athenæum could shew was to let him die in peace.

It is somewhat less intelligible that he should have been allowed to shirk an obvious duty to the Marston Abbas gallery when he came of age and again when he married and yet again when he had his own son painted by Greiffenhagen. I have been told, indeed, that, soon after succeeding, he did in fact sit to Orpen and that, being

dissatisfied with the result, he made away with it. Whatever the reason, however, Noel Custance holds the field unchallenged now with a slick, conventional massing of bright colours, from which posterity must get its only idea of the third viscount.

What, I wonder, will that be ? And how far was Alster satisfied with his second appearance on an artist's dais ? I see a figure that is, beyond question, "*lofty, aloof, Viscontial*" ; almost I hear the ringing tones of the A.D.C. announcing His Excellency's approach ; and, as the women make their imagined curtseys, I prepare myself to bow from the waist to His Majesty's Representative, surreptitiously fingering my chest to make sure that the obligatory orders and decorations are in place. It is a brave scene ; and Lord Alster, with his great height and erect carriage, cuts a brave figure that I should know anywhere for a governor-general, even if I did not easily recognize my friend Richard Croyle in this "*Viscount to the finger-tips*".

That, indeed, is my basic objection to the portrait : in my considered opinion it is a piece of mechanical court-painting and I feel sure that, if the subject had tried to make away with this too, the thrifty Custance would cheerfully have taken the canvas back, painted out one set of features, painted in another and offered it as "*The Successor to His Excellency the Lord Alster*".

As a "likeness", to be sure, it catches the narrow face and rather melancholy, red-brown eyes ; the ginger moustache successfully hides the undecided mouth, while leaving the underhung jaw to proclaim a silent, strong man ; and the aquiline Croyle nose almost juts into a third dimension. For all this, it remains the characteristic product of an artist who was always more concerned with types than with individuals. This, I imagine, is the secret of Custance's colossal, if insecure, success : to

future generations, in London and Canberra, the Lord Alster, G.C.M.G., will be, unmistakably, every inch an empire-builder ; and whether he will be the Lord Alster whom his intimate contemporaries knew is probably of small interest to an accomplished mass-producer who might fairly retaliate by asking who and what the "real" Lord Alster was. The two volumes of the official *Life* were the work of a man who had served on the governor-general's staff ; but are they any more revealing than Custance's fashion-plate ?

And did Alster himself wish to appear as more than a type ?

I am the more ready to believe that he made away with an early portrait of himself when I remember how he rejected the later "pen-portrait"—as the proprietor of the *Morning Standard* described it—for which I allowed myself to be made responsible. On both occasions of being confronted with his "real" self, his criticism may be expressed in the words : "*No one would recognize me from this !*" It should scarce be necessary for me to disclaim all feeling of pique that my sketch was not even discussed. I had no great desire to undertake a portrait of any kind ; and, if he was satisfied with a rehash from the reference-books, which made him as much a governor-general in the texture and sit of every garment as Custance's faultless tailor's-model of a few years later, I have no cause for complaint.

It was not literature, but it was excellent journalism. The boy, in this egregious production of mine, was father to the man ; Government House beckoned him from the playing-fields of Eton ; and Canberra, if that unlovely name had fallen on his adolescent hearing, would have blazed in the sky above the dreaming spires of Oxford. Never was man dedicated sooner or more consistently

to his ultimate task ; and, if this is not how history is in fact made, it is at least how history is written if—by Dick Croyle's test of instant recognizability—the public must only be given what the public is prepared to accept.

A time, however, comes when the public feels an interest in the man beneath the clothes ; and, when that dawn breaks on the late governor-general of the Australian Commonwealth, the Custance portrait will perhaps be superseded by an album of family photographs, Captain Dutton's official *Life* supplemented by a garrulous memoir-writer. A generation reared on Mr. Lytton Strachey has learnt that even an eminent Victorian must occasionally have shed his garter-robcs, his frock-coat or his Roman toga ; and, if Richard Croyle, third Viscount and first Earl Alster, be of sufficient interest to posterity, some one will undress the portrait and exhume the body from below the industrious gravedigger's two volumes. That time is perhaps not yet, while the wreaths are hardly faded ; and, though I have Croyle's written permission to publish what I like after his death, I am at present only concerned to study how and why the Dutton life was written, the Custance portrait painted, and to contrast the Lord Alster of the orders and decorations with the Lord Alster that I dimly descry under the statesman's mask.

The " authorized biography " lies before me as I write. From the dates in the preface I see that Captain Dutton spent two years in elaborating the bare facts which I had collected for him from *Who's Who* before Alster left England ; but, though he enriched them with a few chapters on the governor-general's truncated administration, I do not feel that these add anything more to the *Life* than Custance's hazy map of Australia in the background of the portrait. Historically, the career,

personality and appearance of Lord Alster were all fixed when, in effect, Fleet Street asked what was to be said about him and he, after ten minutes' consideration of my bald facts and dates, informed me that he had "nothing to add".

Obviously, Alster felt that he would suffer by having the whole truth told about him. I thought that he would gain. And that is how this book has come to be written, though it clearly cannot be published in the life-time of any who appear in its pages.

2

By a pleasing irony, I was selected to "clear up the mystery of this fellow Alster"—as Sir John Bunting put it to his editorial council—not because I knew him, but because I knew so many other people who would be able to tell me all about him.

It was chiefly because he believed I knew so many people that Bunting had retained my services when, in the first years after the war, he bought the controlling interest in the *Morning Standard*. I am disposed to think that the greatest change in the working of public affairs during my life-time has been the growth of personal "contacts". Fleet Street and Downing Street, "the City" and Mayfair are linked as they were never linked in the days of Delane and Palmerston or of Disraeli and the Rothschilds. "Who's the live wire in this outfit?," my chief would demand. "Hell, then, give him a ring! Send him a chit! Or . . . Say, listen! If he'll play our best ball Sat'day Stoke Poges . . ." So a meeting was brought about, information pooled on the fifth green and a deal arranged over a drink at the dormy-house almost before the cabinet boxes and the departmental files had begun to circulate.

A newcomer like Bunting, ignorant and in a hurry, needed to have his "contacts" made for him; and it was my duty to know the man—or at least to know a man who knew the man—who could "cut the cackle", "get down to brass tacks" and "deliver the goods". Since the name of Lord Alster was unknown to my chief when it was put forward in connection with the vacant governor-generalship, I was instructed as usual to "collect the dope" from one or other of the "gangs" that I was supposed to frequent; and, as he chose to assume that I was equally unacquainted with "this unknown deadhead", I saw no reason to undeceive him.

We had come to Risborough for the "cabinet meeting" which Bunting held every Saturday when parliament was sitting; and in the absence of more pressing business—a new party to form or an old leader to slay—he invited us to consider the position of Australia in the Empire, this empty throne in Canberra and—by inference—the possibility of making capital out of the prime minister's delay in filling it and thus winning fresh laurels for the *Morning Standard* as the one organ of opinion that never feared nor hesitated to keep conservative, liberal, labour and coalition ministers up to the mark.

"A continent the size of Australia," he informed me, "is too important to be left waiting while the P.M. hawks this appointment about. Considered imperially . . ."

We were still considering Australia imperially when he confided that he had "reason to believe" the appointment had been, was being or would be offered to an obscure peer named Alster; and we were tacitly encouraged to advise him whether he should "bull" this choice and get the credit of having forced it on the government or "sell a bear" and subsequently pulverize the govern-

ment for holding on to a man whose market-value he had publicly destroyed.

The "cabinet", if Bunting himself was to be considered the soveran to whom we tendered our advice, consisted of five members: Blair, the lean and melancholy editor-in-chief; Norden, the suave and not too scrupulous business-manager; Fortescue, the almost inarticulate head of the imperial and foreign department; Courtneidge, the misshapen but omniscient principal leader-writer; and myself. How I should properly be described I am not sure. At luncheon and at the council-meeting afterwards I always sat next to Sir John and might be called, at least geographically, his right-hand man. He himself regarded me sometimes as a "buffer", when he wished to avoid personal encounter with an awkward visitor, sometimes as a "shock-absorber", when the visitors collected in angry numbers, sometimes as a peace-maker, when he lost his nerve, and—grudgingly—as an ambassador plenipotentiary when a hostile power conceded that it would treat with Mr. Leslie Vivian, but would for no consideration even meet Mr. Vivian's intolerable and outrageous principal. By the world at large I believe I was mentioned with respect as the power behind the throne of Sir John Bunting. I think I should have defined myself as a reluctant and faintly disgusted spectator of "the new journalism".

And yet, on second thoughts, I am not convinced of my own reluctance. Whenever—as now—I looked from my exigent employer to my cowed colleagues, there seemed little reason to find fault with the position I had made for myself. When Bunting—all five-foot-nothing of energy, mischief and vulgarity—swept into Fleet Street with the avowed intention of partitioning the newspaper world, I was the only member of the sober,

old *Morning Standard* staff to resign. In part, I was tired of leader-writing after ten years; and the death of my parents had now made me financially independent. In part, I disliked Sir John and thought it seemlier to end my contract than to have it ended for me. Rather strangely, the effect of my initiative was to make Bunting regard me as indispensable; when my former associates were thrown into the street as "dead-heads" and "has-beens", I was invited to state the terms on which I would remain and, when I insisted that neither power nor money was my aim, I was offered a salary equal to the editor-in-chief's and more scope than he would ever be allowed for moulding the new proprietor to the traditions of the *Morning Standard* instead of watching while the *Morning Standard* was moulded to the designs of the new proprietor.

Since Bunting refused to admit in words that any one was indispensable to him, he cloaked his eagerness for my services by hinting that I could best help the paper for whose dignity I was so jealous if I would "tide him over the transition"; and for a dozen years, while editors came and went, I remained as a chartered libertine to whom "kid-gloved private secretaries" were supposed to unbend when the very mention of Sir John Bunting's name caused the Treasury Exchange to say that the minister's telephone was engaged. He had received a fresh rebuff within an hour or two of our meeting; and his first words, after throwing us the name of Dick Alster to digest, were that he supposed I could find out something about him, as the Dominions Office was following its usual policy of "hush-hush".

"What do you want me to find out?," I asked, collecting myself from the examination of memories that went back to the middle eighties.

"Why, hell, everything!", replied Bunting with his usual comprehensiveness and force. "Seems we haven't even an obituary at the office. According to the books . . ."

As I said nothing, he broke off to ring for his secretary, who hurried into the "cabinet-room" with six copies of a memorandum obviously compiled from the *Peerage* and *Who's Who*. There, if Bunting had given us time, we might have studied the history of the Alster creation, the Croyle arms and the diversions of the present peer; but an unpitying blue pencil was already engaged in pruning the record of irrelevancies and at the end of two minutes, if we had been consulted, we must have agreed with our chief that the dry bones remaining were not a meal to offer the readers of the *Morning Standard*. Instead of being consulted, however, we were curtly informed that, unless something more could be discovered or invented in Alster's favour, he was hardly the man to offer as governor-general to the citizens of the Australian Commonwealth.

"A complete nonentity, so far as I can see," was Bunting's verdict.

"Do you know whether he has actually been approached?", asked Blair.

"I was told so last night. He's fishing in Ireland at present and won't be back for three weeks. If he turns the thing down, there's no need for us to bother. If he accepts it, though, we must know whether he's a man we want to write up. In fact, *before* he accepts it . . . I'm not going to give the support of the *Morning Standard*," Bunting continued truculently, "to an unknown backwoodsman just because he happens to have been at school with somebody or to have married somebody else's third cousin. If we can't get a live wire, it's better for the Australians to choose one of their own people."

"Have you heard," asked Fortescue, "whether Alster's likely to take it?"

"My informant is to let me know about that," Bunting replied with the happy consequence of a small child hugging a "secret".

All but our chief's copy of the memorandum had been left in the state in which they had been drawn up. I saw Norden studying his with a whimsical smile that held something of envy.

"I wonder why he should *bother!*," he exclaimed. "I know the outside of Marston Abbas: it's a lovely place. And I should think he has plenty of money to keep it up. It's not as though he hadn't done his bit, either. Unless he's ambitious and thinks everything so far has been rather small beer . . ."

"Or unless his wife thinks it for him," Blair interposed with a laugh. "I met Lady Alster a year or two ago . . ."

"The money may have rather evaporated in the American slump," Fortescue suggested. "He'll save by closing everything down and going abroad."

"Or he may feel he'd like a change," said Bunting, who himself liked a change once every eighteen months. "They've been married twenty-something years. Before we consider *why* he wants the job, though, I should like to know *why* it's been *offered*, who the fellow *is*. Hell! I mean t'say, I must know whether he's a man I should care about supporting," he concluded.

3

"ALSTER, 3rd Viscount, cr. 1869; RICHARD DYMSON HEDDERWICK CROYLE, D.S.O., 1917; late Major, the Dorset Regiment; b. 16 May, 1882; e.s. of 2nd Visc. and Georgina (d. 1910). d. of late Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arnold Scrymgeour-Torrington K.C.B.:

s. *father* 1912; m. 1908, *Felicity*, d. of Ogden B. Tann, New York; one s., one d. Educ. Eton (*Cricket XI* 1899, 1900) *Magdalen Coll., Oxford* (*Represented Oxford against Cambridge at cricket* 1901-2); B.A. 1904; M.A. 1908. M.P. (*Conservative*) N.E. *Dorsetshire* 1904-1912. *Served in European War* 1914-1918 (*wounded twice; despatches four times*). *A member of the Royal Commission on Currency Reform*, 1920. *Chairman of the Select Committee on Rural Preservation*, 1924. . . ."

The commissions and committees on which Lord Alster had served since the war made a long list; and I did not trouble to refresh my memory of something that could wait until I had found out how much was generally known about my friend and therefore how much I was expected to supplement. In due time I also wanted to discover the avowed reason for ambitions which Alster himself derided even when he was asking his friends to forward them.

"Eight years in the House as a private member," I said. Since he really seemed to want the appointment, I did not intend—so far as in me lay—to let him be thwarted by a professional trafficker in crises who would bring down a government or stir up a war if thereby he could increase his circulation. "Four years' service," I went on. "And then a mass of unpaid committee work . . ."

"With no more experience of administration than my foot," Bunting interrupted in a tone that made me think he had a candidate of his own. "What Australia wants at the present time . . ."

"It will make my job easier," I said, "if I know whether you mean to write him up or write him down."

"Hell, verdict first, evidence afterwards?"

"You have the evidence," I returned, pointing to the memorandum.

"Furnished by Alster himself!"

"But you can supply your own interpretation, judging a little by the quality and still more by the quantity of it."

"And you couldn't pad the whole thing out to half a column," my chief informed me. "News-value? *Nil!* A human story . . . ?"

So far as in me lay, I was determined that Alster should not be catechized, directly or indirectly, on chapters of his life that he regarded as his own concern.

"You shall have two columns," I promised Bunting, "before I go to bed to-night. For argument's sake, you feel inclined to bless? Very well! Here you have the blameless descendant of a blameless line, a man who's given his services to the state ever since he came down from Oxford, an old parliamentary hand, a soldier with a first-rate war-record. You see the sort of thing? Of course, if you've a better candidate up your sleeve . . ."

"I want the best man for the job," said Bunting with a blunt man's rugged virtue.

"It would be easy to write Alster down on precisely the same evidence."

I broke off as the secretary came in again to say that our chief was wanted for a trunk-call from Whitehall; and, as the door of the "cabinet-room" shut behind him, Courtneidge informed me that, if I needed any personal information about Alster, he was probably in a position to supply it. Not, indeed, that there was much to say, as the entry in *Who's Who* contained not only all that the fellow cared to publish about himself, but all that he would reveal to his dearest friend. It was an inarticulate breed, without much thought beyond soldiering; correct, conventional and upright, but limited; and Alster was somewhat more reserved and unbending than most of his kind. Courtneidge had met him on various occasions

in the last twenty years and did not envy me the task of "popularizing" him.

"He's the backbone of England and all that sort of thing," he continued. "Stolid, incorruptible, a model husband and father, but not wildly interesting. You called him 'blameless'; and that just describes him. He hasn't it in him to be anything else. He'll do the job admirably, but he's a dull dog. Now, *Lady Alster* . . ."

I should have liked to thank my colleague for the light he had thrown on a man who had been my best friend since we were small boys together; but at this moment the door was flung open and Sir John Bunting returned to us with a velocity which I always felt he must have copied from Mr. Harold Nicolson's description of Signor Mussolini entering a room.

"You were saying that on the same evidence . . .," he prompted me.

"It would be possible to make Lord Alster cut a very poor figure," I replied. "Consider how it can be presented! To rule over a new country of hard-working, self-made men, you have a governor-general who only took the trouble to be born. Once that effort was satisfactorily achieved, he found himself heir to a title and—as Norden has told you—a magnificent estate, for which the daughter of an American railroad-king was only too glad to marry him. An aristocrat—and therefore inevitably effete—condescendingly uprooting himself for a few years to govern one of the most democratic countries under the sun in the hopes of receiving a new order or being raised a step in the peerage."

"I can't say that in the *Morning Standard*," Bunting grumbled. "One of the communist rags . . ."

"I could put it into suitable language," I promised him. "So could your secretary or one of the office-boys . . ."

The more I seemed disinclined for the task, the less likely—I felt—Bunting would be to employ another hand.

“My informant,” he announced with a frown, “has good reason to think that, if the offer’s made, Alster will accept it. I’ve had that this moment. The question will only be broached officially when he comes back from Ireland. I think you’d better see him there, Vivian . . .”

“To get more of his own ‘dope’?”, I asked.

Bunting stumped to the window with his hands clasped Napoleonically behind his back and stared across a lawn that mounted and melted into the Chilterns a mile away. The rest of us exchanged rather weary smiles and waited for yet another of the arbitrary, spin-of-a-coin decisions which our chief thought essential to the “independence” of the *Morning Standard*.

“I’m going to back the appointment,” he announced abruptly. “I want Alster written up. For reasons of public policy. Australia at the present time . . . I’m promised that we shall be a day ahead of any other paper with the news,” he continued gleefully, sinking the responsible statesman in the irresponsible sensation-monger. “We shall be a week ahead on the publicity if we have all our information ready. Get hold of any one who’s known the fellow at any stage of his career, Vivian. Let Alster have an opportunity of vetting what you’ve written. He may give you some absolutely exclusive stuff . . .”

I did not think I should be told much that I did not know already, but I felt that I had saved my friend without Bunting’s even suspecting that he was my friend.

“You leave me to arrange with him what the write-up is to be?”, I asked.

“Yes. A pen-picture. . . .”

“I understand. May I have my car?”

As I stood up, the editor-in-chief asked if I could say at all when my account of the governor-general designate would be ready and what space should be kept for it.

"You can have it to-morrow," I told him, as we moved out of our host's hearing. "Can I give you a lift back? And it will run to exactly two columns."

4

My relations with Bunting and Blair may perhaps be likened to those of a temporary master at a preparatory school with a pettily tyrannical head and a miserably oppressed second-in-command. Being there "to oblige", I took liberties and—I daresay—gave myself airs. While my little tyrant could neither make nor break me, I—as he chose to think—could help him more than all the rest of his staff.

It might be expected that my colleagues would detest me for the gross partiality that I enjoyed and the grosser licence that I allowed myself; but I think I was in fact regarded with a little admiration, slight awe and unbounded envy. I said so much that they all thought! They would have spoken their minds so much more freely if they had not had wives and children dependent on them! As we drove back to London that afternoon, the editor-in-chief observed that I seemed able to do what I liked with the "old man".

"Oh, come!", I said. "I only monopolized the conversation because the little ruffian was becoming a bore with his cant about postponing the verdict till he'd heard all the evidence. As though he ever allowed mere truth to affect his policy!"

"Are you really going to write up Alster inside the office?," asked Blair, as an oppressed second-master might asked a light-minded newcomer whether he really

proposed to draw up his form-reports without adding the marks for the term.

"For my own satisfaction, yes," I answered. "I've been left to settle with Alster in what guise he is to emerge from obscurity as the ideal governor-general. Like Courtneidge, I believe he's said all he wants to say; and, when I've put some flesh on the bare bones in *Who's Who*, you can have my copy set up. I *may* be wrong, though: it's conceivable that Alster may snatch at this opportunity of undressing in public, so I'll rough out a second sketch reversing the light and shade, hurrying over anything that he has put in and concentrating on what he's left out. The 'human story' . . . It will be an interesting study in the art of biography, though I don't suppose for a moment that Alster will give it his *imprimatur*."

"And I don't know where you'll get your information," Blair began. "At least . . ."

After a few moments' thought, he wrote down the names of two men who had shared my friend's back-bench in the House of Commons and one who had sat with him on the Currency Commission.

"Can you get to know Lady Alster?," he continued.

"I knew her before he did!"

"Then that's plain sailing. Now, in the cricket world: anything you can say about that ought to go down well in Australia . . ."

"But I don't need any witnesses. Man alive, I was at school with Dick Croyle and at Oxford with him! We were in the same regiment during the war! Since then we've rather drifted apart, but we meet at certain gatherings two or three times a year and he always comes back to Ryder Street for a drink and a talk. He dined with me this week."

Blair's amazement was definitely spiced with awe.

"You never let the old man know that !," he expostulated.

"He never asked me," I said. "If I'd volunteered it, he might have given some one else the job, with less good results for Alster. If a man's good enough for the P.M. to recommend . . ."

"He'll want a bit of writing up," said Blair. "The public knows almost nothing about him."

After dinner that evening I began and finished my two columns. It would be affectation in a journalist of far shorter experience to pretend that I did not succeed in depicting Lord Alster convincingly as the very best of his kind. If I borrowed freely from two or three works of reference, it was my interpretation of the brief facts they contained that afterwards gave its character to the picture and presented the readers of the *Morning Standard* with a vision of the new governor-general which was accepted without criticism as it had been published without alteration. Since, by Bunting's characteristically corrupt bargain, I had a day's start of my fellow pressmen, they blithely copied from me ; and half a dozen years later, when Captain Dutton came to write the official life, he said nothing—as I have hinted—in his two volumes that I had not sketched in my two columns.

I take no exaggerated pride in something that a hundred other men could have done as well or better. Without servility or fulsomeness I drew Alster as one born to a tradition of service, who had fitted himself for a life of affairs by a patient and inconspicuous apprenticeship in parliament. Eton and Oxford were presented as the cradle and nursery of statesmen ; the army as a stern school in which men of action were fashioned. When my

"appreciation" was published two or three weeks later, both Courtneidge and Blair observed that this was very much the man that they had deduced from their few meetings with him and that I had said all there was to say.

"A dull, but eminently *respectable* official," commented one of them, "who has led a dull, but eminently *respectable* life . . ."

And yet *was* it all that I could have found to put in? Neither Alster's frigid contribution to *Who's Who* nor my mellow amplification of it would have retained their original form if at the end of any single statement any single reader had enquired the reason of it and if Alster had furnished a complete answer. In fulfilment of my promise that I would rough out a second sketch, with a different *chiaroscuro*, I imagined myself to be taking Alster through my article, sentence by sentence, and asking "Why?" at the end of each:

"*It is stated here that you entered the House of Commons in 1904. Why? And why did you marry Felicity, daughter of Ogden B. Tann? Why did you choose the Dorset Regiment in the War? Why, above all, are you now uprooting yourself from England, the West Country, Marston Abbas, to govern Australia?*"

I could not say that night whether my answers would have been Alster's; but I could say that, if I had published them, every one would have treated the result as the biography of a different man, neither so "dull" nor so "respectable" as the slightly unimaginative Blair and Courtneidge were disposed to believe. Perhaps the prime minister would have thought him an unsuitable person to recommend, the king an impossible recommendation to approve. It is all a question, I should say, whether one wants a tailor's model or a man. Meanwhile, the facts underlying both presentations were the same.

the difference depended on the manner in which they were stressed.

And this was the point I had tried to make that afternoon when Sir John Bunting urged me to discuss my friend with "every one", to collect "*everything*" for the *dossier*.

5

"Every one, everything ?," I repeated to myself with a smile.

Some of the witnesses had died long since, others would have died by slow torture before they testified, others again must have remained silent through utter ignorance. As a matter of form and to secure the one answer that eluded me—what public reason Dick Alster would give for his willingness to exile himself—, I was ready to approach any one, even his wife ; but I felt it would be wasted labour.

Already I knew more that I was likely to be told. My father was vicar of Marston and chaplain to the second viscount at the time of Richard Croyle's birth. He coached the two of us in our holidays when I was scholarship-hunting and Dick was making an unsuccessful assault on Winchester (the entry in *Who's Who* did not reveal that Eton was a *pis-aller* or that the present Lord Alster had been originally intended for Christ Church, not Magdalen). As we grew up together, I spent more and more time at the "Big House", as it was called ; and I was at a party there when Dick first met Flavia Wreyden, whose name does not appear in any of the biographies. I dined with him periodically at the Bank of England, or Saint James' Palace, though it is not mentioned that he ever held a commission in His Majesty's Foot Guards. I visited him at Westminster when I was working in Fleet Street, though his reasons for entering

the House of Commons have always been a matter of speculation. When he married Felicity Tann, I helped to arrange for the banns to be given out ; and he would probably have consulted me before any one if he had wanted a divorce-petition to be filed.

So till the end of the war, when—between royal commissions—he settled in the country and I returned to London. Even then I saw enough of him to feel no surprise when Bunting introduced his name. There were excellent reasons—I only wondered which was the determining one—why Alster should be willing to accept work abroad.

The biography of a different man, I have said, this imaginary sketch would have been called if I had been allowed to ask "*Why ? Why ? Why ?*" and if I had received an answer to my questions. I prefer to regard it as a second aspect of the same man, sometimes complementary—like a full-face to a profile—and sometimes conflicting, as when a youthful and erect figure is found in company with old battered features. I hope to shew that the "typical", inhuman governor-general grew as naturally out of the "individual", human boy named Dick Croyle as the Duke of Wellington grew out of a disappointed Irish place-hunter named Arthur Wesley. For a full understanding of the man, I submit that he must be viewed in both guises ; but, whereas an imaginative writer could infer Alster's public life—or something very like it—from his private, no one could begin to picture his private life from his public. This, therefore, is my justification for revealing what Alster himself chose to keep concealed.

Any one reading this last sentence might imagine that His Excellency's official robes covered at least a libertine, perhaps a criminal. This is ridiculous, but hardly more ridiculous than the assumption that Dick Croyle or the

Honourable Richard Croyle, M.P., or Major Lord Alster, D.S.O., or the Viscount Alster, G.C.M.G., had nothing to hide. Who among us can say at sixty or forty or twenty that his life is an open book? Who among us can pretend at any age that his public life has not been affected, or even conditioned, by the life that he keeps secret?

And yet the whole Dutton school of biographers would have us believe that their heroes never got into discreditable scrapes over money, never deceived a woman or betrayed a man, indulged no vices, surrendered to no weaknesses. When a Dilke or a Parnell tripped, he was disgraced and broken as the dreadful exception that proved the rule; and only a cynic ventured to hint that such a man was punished less for tripping than for being caught tripping.

I suppose it is all very excellent for the tone of English public life; but it is a little unconvincing. Either our Melbournes and Palmerstons have gone down before our Peels and Gladstones, which I find hard to believe; or the eighteenth-century tradition has been forced to borrow a puritan dress, which I find hard to stomach. As I told Dick Alster a week or two after the time of which I am writing, we needed men of flesh and blood for our big public positions, not middle-aged choir-boys of the kind I had drawn in my "appreciation".

"I should have thought," he answered in his slow, deep voice, "that a man's private affairs, what he eats and drinks, his religion . . ."

"Are the only things that Bunting and his readers are interested in," I said. "That's by the way, though. It's a man's strengths and weaknesses, his temptations, his lapses and recoveries that *make* him a man . . ."

"You'd better leave that till I'm dead," said Dick.

And I have.

CHAPTER TWO

“ EDUCATED : ETON AND MAGDALEN . . . ”

I

WHEN Dick Croyle and I reached an age to discuss our future careers, a newspaper-office seemed as improbable a destination for me as a government-house for him. Indeed, once my father had convinced himself of my distaste for holy orders he only hesitated between schoolmastering and the civil service, regarding the journalist as a man without education or social status.

Lord Alster, only waiting to be assured that his first child was a boy, dedicated him forthwith to the army and set about making a soldier of him before he was well out of the monthly nurse's hands. Not for nothing were Dick's godparents Sir Garnet Wolseley, Sir Frederick Roberts and Lady Napier of Magdala ; and I find it significant that the first meeting I can clearly remember with father and son was by the gate of our local doctor's garden on the day when my own father ran, shovel-hat in hand, down the one street of Marston to announce that a place called Khartoum had fallen and that a man named Gordon was dead.

After nearly half a century I can still see a narrow-faced little boy, beaky and underhung, astride a very big pony ; I can see a very big man, also narrow-faced, beaky and underhung, on a very big horse ; and, whether or no the words were used, I can see a set expression which says : “ *We shall have to wipe this-out.* ” I see my mother, under a Shetland shawl ; and then, as

coherent memory seldom begins before five, this one vivid scene is lost in the dissolving views of remotest childhood and I recall only that for many years I always thought of Dick Croyle riding at the head of his men on some punitive expedition.

By any one in Lord Alster's position, no other career could have been entertained in the martial eighties and nineties, when Queen Victoria was on the throne, the Duke of Cambridge commander-in-chief and Lord Salisbury prime minister. The Croyles had first made their way into history as servants of the Honourable East India Company; and the great Elizabethan house at Marston Abbas was purchased from a ruined Regency “buck” out of the fortune amassed by Richard Croyle, last of the Nabobs and first of the baronets. The family supplied soldiers, of a rather “go-as-you-please” and certainly “help-yourself” complexion, under Clive and Warren Hastings; it continued to supply them from among its younger sons for another half-century; and the military habit became fixed, Amurath to Amurath succeeding, at the time of the Mutiny, when Richard, fourth baronet, began a career which brought him at various times the rank of major-general, the title of viscount and the thanks of parliament for several thousand square miles of unwanted territory and about two million new and intermittently protesting British subjects. His son Richard, fifth baronet and second viscount, served principally in North and South Africa, retiring as a lieutenant-general after the Omdurman campaign.

For Dick, it was naturally assumed, there would be further heights to scale, when the time came; it was assumed that he would scale them; and, though I had probably never heard of the King of Rome in these days, I feel now that the young Eagle of Marston Abbas must

have been suckled on his father's campaigns and weaned on his grandfather's contributions to empire.

Certainly he was brought up in the atmosphere of a parade-ground, I with him ; and even in middle life we could both have written a tolerably full history of British imperial expansion on the strength of the Croyle portraits in the long gallery. My horsemanship, such as it is, was learnt in the Marston riding-school, where Dick and I were trained to gallop and jump bareback on the general's biggest hunters. And we were taught to swim by being thrown into the middle of an eight-foot-deep pool and left to find our way out. For the individual, the family and the nation, Lord Alster told us, there was no standing still and very little standing easy : we must climb higher or slip back and, for Dick at least, fingering the old flintlocks and powder-horns in the museum, there could be no slipping back.

" We've not yet had a *full* general in the family," he would say ; and, as the brooding eyes turned to the map of the North-West Frontier, I could see that he was envisaging the " inevitable " war with Russia for which Mr. Kipling's Indian stories were preparing us.

I wished at times that my own father was more distinguished so that I might have a higher mark than that of a country parson to reach and pass ; but indifferent health, a modest competence and an enthusiasm for late-Latin poets and historians had anchored him before he was thirty in the place where he was to remain until he died. The best I could do at this time, a make-believe best, was to become as smart and hard-trained, as insensible to heat, cold, hunger and fatigue, as Dick ; and the highest praise that I ever received was Lord Alster's statement that he really believed I had the makings of a soldier in me.

That our Spartan training could impose any moral strain never occurred to me until one evening about a year before Dick and I left our preparatory school. I was curled up with a book in the window-seat of my father's study when a dog-cart pulled up at the gate and our big, blond neighbour, Doctor Hadleigh, strode in, booming that he did not want to interrupt the weekly sermon but that he had a favour to ask.

“That eldest boy of Alster's,” he explained, throwing himself into a chair and balancing his silk hat on his knees. “Could you give him some coaching these holidays? I'll see the Lord Panjandrum about it in due course, but I wanted a word with you first. Dick's of quite average intelligence, but his wretched over-anxiety keeps him from doing himself credit.”

“Another bad report? ”, asked my father.

The doctor nodded :

“And another shindy. Which means he'll go back so *determined* to do better that he'll make an even greater ass of himself. I want you to break the vicious circle.”

My father, somewhat to my disgust, answered that he had thought of giving me a little tuition this summer and that no doubt he could take Dick at the same time. Were there any subjects in which the boy was specially weak?

“I must leave you to find that out,” the doctor returned. “It's his mental *attitude* I'm concerned with. After all, a false quantity isn't a hanging offence. If it were, there wouldn't be a doctor left alive in England.”

“Medical Latin is *sui generis*,” said my father in his prim, scholastic voice. “Do you suggest that his parents *drive* the boy?”

“He drives himself,” answered Dr. Hadleigh. “I like youngsters to be ambitious,” he continued, “but this worthy-son-of-his-father business has become morbid

and will defeat its own end. If he doesn't get into Winchester . . ."

"He can't fail!", my father exclaimed.

The doctor stood up, shrugging his shoulders :

"We'll hope not. If he *does* . . . They've been there, father and son, since the time of William What's-His-Name. . . . Well, I want you to give the boy a bit of confidence and to make him feel that an entrance-examination is not the Last Judgement. If you shoved up a net in your orchard and let him bowl to Leslie . . . You know, he and his excellent father have combined to take the fun even out of games. Alster has that pro. Lawson for Dick, the boy makes himself silly with his footwork and his wrist-work. Then, when a slow, good-length ball is sent down to him, he loses his head and tramples on his wicket. It would be much better for him if he occasionally let all the science go to Jericho and slammed out like a girl, with a crooked bat and both eyes shut." .

2

Perhaps naturally, the part of this conversation that impressed me most was Dr. Hadleigh's proposal for cricket practice at the vicarage. I also had suffered from Lord Alster's kindness and from the professional's determination to teach me style when I wanted to lift the ball out of the field.

For Dick, too, it was the most pregnant of the doctor's suggestions, for at the Marston nets Lawson did all the bowling and we were stationed in turn to watch the other's mistakes. It was not until Dick came to the vicarage for Saturday-afternoon single-wicket with my father and the doctor that he was allowed to bowl ; and it was only when he ran my father out with a ball thrown in from a deep square-leg that the doctor called out :

“Here, young man, are you left-handed? Do that again, if you please!”

That afternoon a born fast bowler was discovered. Right- or left-handed, Dick was never more than a moderate bat; but, as a first-change left-handed bowler, he played for Eton, Oxford and “the Gentlemen”. When I read Captain Dutton on these early triumphs, I feel he might have given a word of credit to Hadleigh; but the doctor was so much absorbed in a second discovery, which he made almost simultaneously, that I am sure he never noticed the omission. Like the first, this finds no place in the official *Life*, though I maintain that any biographer who knew his subject would have mentioned it, as I am mentioning it now, in his opening pages. If it is not the key to Dick’s character, it is at least an answer to many riddles in his career.

Like the first, this second discovery was made in the orchard at the back of the vicarage, where the cardinal condition of our single-wicket was that we were playing to amuse ourselves. A bad stroke might elicit a groan but never a lecture; and I thought the doctor was improving the occasion to excess whenever, as the summer wore on, he called out to Dick: “Aha! Now I shouldn’t have bowled you if you’d stood your ground.” This, in effect, was what the professional always said; and Lord Alster, who was somewhat taller than the rest of us even when he was seated on a shooting-stick, would deliver himself, as though he were umpiring at manœuvres, of the judgement that, if a game was worth playing, it was worth playing properly. We met at the vicarage, I thought, to escape all that; and I did not dream that Dr. Hadleigh was thinking of anything but cricket until a memorable evening when he jumped down from his dog-cart in frock-coat and tall hat, apologizing for his lateness and

saying that, as there was no time to change, we must play with a soft ball and no pads.

"You keep sticks, Leslie," he called out to me, laying his coat and hat on a chair. "You can stand right up, this thing won't hurt you. I shall put myself on to bowl. And we'll have the vicar at mid-on."

We played until the light failed and then lay cooling in deck-chairs, while the doctor gave us a representation of old-fashioned cricket in the days of strapped trousers and top-hats. Dick had carried his bat for something over thirty, after hitting out as though he positively enjoyed it ; but he had become more silent than usual now and was sitting with his eyes shut and his lips pressed tightly together. As I watched I noticed that his forehead was glistening, then that his head had fallen on his shoulder as though the neck were broken.

The reason was not far to seek : his chair had collapsed under him, crushing all four fingers on one hand. He had fainted from the pain and, when we brought him round, he fainted again at the sight of his own blood. This was before the days of telephones ; and I was sent at a run to the "Big House" with the news that we were keeping Dick at the vicarage until his hand had been dressed. When I got back, he was stretched on a sofa, making faces over a minute glass of brandy, while my mother bathed the injured fingers and the doctor towered, frowning, over his patient.

"You don't seem to mind pain," he was saying, as I stood by for fresh orders on the outskirts of the little group in my father's study.

"I don't particularly like it, sir," Dick answered, wincing.

"But you can stand it," the doctor insisted, as though he were arguing some point with a colleague. "Well, in

a soldier's son that's as it should be," he continued. "I should think this has been one of the unpleasantest experiences of your young life !"

"It hurt a bit," Dick admitted, flushing at the tribute to his stoicism.

"I bet it did," Dr. Hadleigh agreed. "And the worst of it is : I've now lost all terrors for you as a demon bowler ! After this, you'll think it a flea-bite to be hit in the ribs with a cricket ball. It's a curious thing," he continued at large : "pain is so often far easier to bear than the *expectation* of pain. We're all apt to exaggerate that. Now, this evening, Dick, I was bowling to you with a tennis-ball, which *couldn't* hurt you, and you stood up to it as I've been urging you to do for weeks. You'd stand up to a cricket-ball if you told yourself that the hardest whack you're ever likely to receive is a deal less painful than shutting your fingers in a chair. If you can face the one . . . And it's the only way to become anything of a bat. However, I don't want to talk like what's-his-name, the pro. : 'Keep that there right foot *steady*, Master Dick ! You're 'opping about for all the world like you was a cat on 'ot bricks.'"

When Dick returned to the nets in a week's time, his hand was still bandaged under the glove ; but he stood his ground with tense, tight-lipped determination and I felt that Lawson's monotonous exhortations, now backed by the doctor, were at last bearing fruit. It did not enter my head that a boy with the moral courage to faint with pain rather than disgrace himself as "a soldier's son" could have been running away ; but, remembering that talk of "over-anxiety", I felt Dick had now learnt that it was his first business, crudely and bluntly, to hit the ball instead of wondering—in a fog of "style"—whether the ball would hit him.

Still less did it enter my head that, in our modern jargon, the doctor had been resolving a complex ; and, if he had hinted in the least technical language that our training in manly virtues might be too dearly bought, I should not have understood him. Neither Dick nor I had elder brothers to lick us into shape ; and he, at least until he stopped growing, was always something of a hobbledehoy, awkward in his movements, sullen in manner and tortured by shyness. He made no friends at our preparatory school, he shunned our few children's parties for fear of having to talk or dance with any girl but his own sister Margaret ; and he would have spent his days mooning in the beech-woods round Marston Abbas or daydreaming in the library, if his parents had not set their hands drastically to the task of civilizing him.

It was some time before I thought of " over-anxiety " as anything but an exaggerated keenness or dreamt that the endless repetition of an uncongenial movement might in time convince a dazed recruit that he would never learn to hold his head erect or to throw out his chest. Dick was in fact learning smartness under one's eyes ; and he was reaping his reward. When Lord Alster descended on Marston between campaigns and I saw Dick standing to attention, I knew there was less and less danger of the general's discovering a material, moral or intellectual button out of place ; and, when Malbrouck went off to his next war, I never imagined that Dick was whispering frantically : *" It's no good ! I shall never be like him. I feel like chewed string ! I don't call it fair . . . "*

Neither to Hadleigh nor to my father and certainly not to me did Dick ever make known this sense of hopelessness ; but I am convinced that the crisis of his boyhood, which occurred some twelve months after the doctor first

talked of a “ vicious circle ”, was brought about by exhaustion of will, when he looked up in a moment of trifling difficulty and saw, as he thought, only his endless, merciless inadequacy for a life which others had arranged without consulting him.

3

It was the mercilessness, I imagine, that broke his twelve-year-old heart : the feeling that, because he had for a moment forgotten a Latin construction, no one would ever forgive or even make allowances for him. I must, however, confine myself to facts and refrain from offering excuses for an offence that has never been proved.

Here, then, is the account that my father gave me, on the evening in 1894 when we received a telegram to say that I had won a scholarship at Eton. After forty years I still think that this was the proudest moment of my life, I can still hear my dreamy little father calling : “ Harriet ! Great news ! A shilling, if you please, for the messenger who’s brought it ! ” ; and, as we paced up and down in the shadow of the great mulberry-tree on the vicarage lawn, I must have seemed so much a man of proved mettle that he was soon treating me as an equal and pointing down a vista of academic success that included, if I remember rightly, a scholarship at Balliol and an All Souls’ fellowship.

“ By the way,” he interjected suddenly with a jerk of his head in the direction of the “ Big House ”, “ you’ll probably have our young friend to keep you company.”

“ *Dick ?*,” I asked.

“ That’s the latest scheme,” my father answered. “ You had better leave him to introduce the subject, but there’s been a hitch over Winchester. Very unfortunate.” Very unpleasant. Very painful.”

"Do you mean he didn't get *in*?" I asked incredulously.

My father reflected for a moment and then laughed rather uneasily:

"I'm *glad* you put that question, in that tone. You've been working with him, Leslie, you've seen how I've marked your papers . . ."

"I should have thought they were *bound* to take him. The son of a swell old Wykehamist . . ."

"I'm glad you should say that *too*," my father broke in with almost intimidating approbation. "In other words, it was an easy thing for Dick? No need for any special effort? Still less any need for anything that wasn't absolutely above-board? I'm going to be quite frank with you, Leslie. The invigilator is under an impression . . . Well, the long and the short of it is that he's charged Dick with cribbing—looking over his neighbour—and has torn up his papers. It's a monstrous accusation . . . I mean, what *motive* . . . ? I know the boy's capabilities and know the *boy*. He wouldn't *do* such a thing. Couldn't. Lord Alster has been down to see the headmaster, to insist on a retraction. A charge of that kind might ruin a boy for *life*. Well . . . The master who was invigilating won't budge. The headmaster—in my humble opinion—is trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. 'Misunderstanding', indeed! Well, they had a second set of papers prepared, Dick had come through with flying colours . . ."

"Three cheers!," I said.

My father shook his head.

"It's good in a *way*. It clears the boy of any motive, but there's been no apology and Lord Alster feels he can't send Dick to a school where there's even a suspicion, even in one man's mind . . . It has been the most

terrible upset. Poor Dick was to have been flogged within an inch of his life if he didn't tell the truth. The lad was unshakable ! I think he's been splendid."

I cannot remember ever seeing my father more deeply moved ; but I well remember, though I was only a boy of thirteen at the time, that I felt a certain surprise at his emotion. Lord Alster and he, Dick and I must have seen the crisis from standpoints so irreconcilably different. Who but a fool ever demanded the truth on pain of a flogging that would be administered in any event if the truth were incriminating ? Of course Dick had been unshakable.

And who but a grown-up, too old to remember his own boyhood, ever imagined that cribbing, in itself, was considered among boys to be a crime ? I can say with knowledge that most of my contemporaries, I with them, from twelve to eighteen, cribbed unblushingly and systematically, syndicating our work and pooling our *Kelly's Keys to the Classics*. There was indeed a fundamental distinction between cribbing in form, when you were defending yourself against a common enemy, and cribbing in an examination, when you were stealing an unfair advantage over your friends ; but Dick's place was already assured him in his father's old house, he was not competing with any one or excluding any one, he had only to satisfy a standard far below that of his abilities.

Had he in fact cribbed ? There was every temptation. I, too, within the last week had been in for an examination ; I had been almost desperate as a vital word eluded me for my Latin elegiacs. And I had become suddenly calm as I recalled the postscript in my mother's last letter : "*Whatever happens, your father and I shall know you've done your best ; and you'll still be young enough for another try next year.*" What, though, of some

one who must—as he conceived—pass into Winchester at all costs this year? The prestige of his family was at stake: Lord Alster had taken Dick down and shewn him round the school that, as a matter of course, he was to adorn next term. He had the knowledge, if only he had not lost his head; but, if he broke down at this first foothill, how could he hope to scale the cloud-capped heights to which his unfortunate destiny called him?

When my father went indoors, I remained by myself in the shadowy garden, trying to picture the scene and to get inside Dick's mind. As though I had been the invigilator, I could see a lanky figure becoming restless, a hand covering the eyes, the eyes turning and glinting between the finger-tips; I could hear an agonized voice whispering: "*Quominus* . . . Of course! . . . With the subjunctive . . . Well, I *knew* that; but I couldn't be sure . . . I couldn't be sure about anything . . ."

And, for the reasons I have given, I did not—at that time—think much the worse of him. Had not my own headmaster at Templedown House said quite dispassionately in his valedictory speech that we should find many boys resorting to "cribs" in the various schools to which we were scattering?

"You'll be wise *not* to follow their example," he had continued. "It rots up your scholarship."

I thought that my father and Lord Alster were making a great to-do about very little.

4

And, if that had been all, I might simply have added to the official record: "*Though intended for Winchester, Richard Croyle was sent to Eton in consequence of a misunderstanding for which—on the authority of the headmaster—he was in no way to blame.*"

Instead, I have called this “the crisis of his boyhood” and insisted on examining it fully in my opening pages. Whether in fact Dick cheated all those years ago is a matter of uncertainty and, I submit, of small moment ; whether he was wrongly accused or wrongly exculpated seems to me a question of vital importance. And, when I lingered by myself in the vicarage garden, it was not so much to conjure up the scene at Winchester as to interpret, if I could, the latter scene at the “Big House”, when Lord Alster asked : “Is this true ?,” and Dick answered : “It is not.” That, if he had in fact cribbed, was a lie of the unforgivable kind. Once a liar, too, always a liar, in every word. Henceforward, if he were guilty, Dick Croyle was an outcast who might be expected to slink by, with his coat-collar turned up, avoiding recognition.

Instead, he presented himself at the vicarage, *Morning Post* in hand, on the day following the conversation that I have reported ; while I was still wondering what to say (or where to look), he offered me his congratulations ; and, hearing that my father was at the other end of the parish, he asked me to give him a letter on his return.

“I suppose you’ve heard about this business at Winchester ?,” he then asked.

“My pater told me you were coming to Eton,” I replied. “That’ll be fun.”

There was no suggestion of slinking about Dick. His rather prominent under-jaw was thrust truculently forward and his brooding, red-brown eyes smouldered sullenly. I thought, though, that his long, thin body was limp, like a doll that has lost half its stuffing.

“I suppose they’ll have me,” he answered with a sniff. “Winchester’s quite willing to have me now.” He opened the letter which he had brought for my father to

see and read out something about "*an unhappy misunderstanding*". "As your pater had heard the first part of the story . . . My people don't want this talked about," he continued, strolling to the window as though the subject was now dismissed for ever.

I found myself obliged to discard very quickly my glib phrases about people who put themselves beyond the pale. Dick had been able to look me in the eyes, which in those days I thought impossible for a liar, and he took it for granted that I believed him.

"It'll be fun . . .," I began again rather lamely.

"I don't know yet whether I shall get in. I suppose you have to have your name down for a house . . ."

It was evidently not contemplated that the Eton authorities might look askance at this belated application on other grounds ; and, as Dick assumed that the story of the "*unhappy misunderstanding*" would be accepted, I found myself once again picturing the scene with the invigilator and the scene with the Alsters, trying to decide whether in my limp, morose friend's place I would rather be innocent or guilty. At the age of about thirteen, to the unwavering belief of his family, Dick had been made the victim of unforgettable injustice ; in every nightmare, I suspect, a gowned figure strode to his desk, snatched up his papers and tore them in two. It was an embittering, warping experience, if indeed his family was justified in its belief ; but it must have been an incalculably more embittering and warping experience, if it was not. I tried to imagine Dick's mood as he returned, white-faced, to tell his father that he had been turned out of the examination. Had he cheated in fact ? If so, it was to avoid disappointing others. Had he lied ? If so, it was because he felt driven to it. The truth would almost have killed Lord Alster, who would have almost or completely killed him. As he walked over to the

vicarage on his way to the doctor's, with a visit to our preparatory school in prospect, not to mention an interview at Eton, he may well have been thinking : "*I must stick to this lie as long as I live.*"

I decided that, in Dick's place, I would rather have been condemned and punished without a chance of defending myself. To be wrongly acquitted may be worse than to be wrongly convicted. I was told afterwards that the inquisition in all its stages occupied less than two minutes. Lady Alster, five foot eleven in her stockings, said carelessly : " Dicky, this isn't true, is it ? " ; and the boy answered : " Of course not." Lord Alster, six foot three and proportionately broad, then said : " Your mother tells me—what I only expected—that this charge is absolutely unfounded. I want to hear you say so " ; and he heard him say so. Then both the parents, who had never even equivocated in all their lives, never hesitated at a fence, never drawn back from the edge of a precipice, carried question and answer with them to the headmaster's house ; and their calm certainty that a child of theirs could no more tell a lie than they could themselves pick a pocket overwhelmed him. They returned from Winchester with the next best thing to an apology ; and Dick, if in fact he had both cheated and lied, was put to the torture of being told by my parents that the son of his father was incapable of doing what he had done, of finding his word accepted as a tribute to the family honour which he had betrayed.

I say "*if*" he had cheated and lied ; but after forty years I am as far as ever from knowing whether it was a tormented conscience or a rankling sense of injustice that ate his heart away this summer through until Dr. Hadleigh took his case in hand, characteristically and unconventionally, by carrying the two of us off for a fortnight's sight-seeing in Belgium. It was our first

experience of a Catholic country ; and, as we wandered from church to church in Bruges, the doctor talked of the confessional as a thing that the Reformation had lamentably failed to replace.

" I've argued this with your father a hundred times, Leslie," he told me. " I want something less than the complete spiritual direction of the Catholics and more than the general confession and general absolution of the Anglicans. To get a thing off my chest, in the vulgar phrase, I need a human being to tell it to : God is too remote, or my conception of him is too vague. And, as a medico, I believe it's as necessary to purge the spirit as it is to purge the body occasionally. . . . However, I didn't bring you here to air my views at your expense ! "

I thought nothing of this speech at the time and, if Dick had anything to confess, I believe he waited two or three years and then confessed it to some one of equal understanding who was nearer to him in age than the doctor ; but now, whenever I think of confession and confessionals, I wonder whether in fact Hadleigh did not bring one of us at least for the very purpose of airing before him his views on the wisdom of purging the spirit. I believe he was faintly disappointed that Dick did not accept his invitation ; but I daresay he comforted himself by reflecting that, once the idea of confession had been accepted, his patient had best be left to choose his own confessor.

5

I am informed that the old antagonism between Collegers and Oppidans has in recent years lost something of its former heat ; but in the middle of the nineties it was a point of honour with Dick to despise me as a " tug " and for me to despise him equally as a vulgar excrescence on the foundation to which I belonged. Numerous—or

numberless even—as these lay-brothers were, they were not the Eton of our pious founder.

During the holidays this traditional gulf was forgotten and we took up the friendship where it had been laid down on the first day of the previous half, though I sometimes felt that we might almost have been at different schools. We were never in the same division at the same time ; we had no friends in common ; and, while my athletic prowess remained as ingloriously obscure at the end of my time as at the beginning, Dick was marked out for fame when he was still a junior. As the entry in *Who's Who* records, he was in the eleven for his last two years ; and, if he said nothing more about his time at Eton, it is because he had nothing more to say. A work of reference is not the proper medium for confidences about one's spiritual growth.

And yet, if he ever passed his life in review as—with the marks of death on his face—he walked the decks of the *Otranto* homeward bound from Australia with a seventeen-gun salute still echoing in his ears, I imagine he would have called this period the happiest that he ever knew. Lord Alster's plan of campaign had been disorganized when the Winchester tradition was broken ; and for five tranquil years no opportunity occurred for the father to say—or for the son to suspect he was saying—: “ *At the end of your first term you will have achieved such-and-such. . . . By the beginning of our third year your grandfather and I had both done so-and-so. . . .*” The main lines of the great career were doubtless unaltered ; but the early stages could not be watched so closely when a Wykehamist father was grappling with the unfamiliar idiom and practice of an Etonian son. Towards the end of his time Dick even secured a concession that amounted to the alteration of one main line ; and Oxford was substituted for Sandhurst when it was represented to Lord

Alster that the seed sown at the Marston nets would in all likelihood bear fruit in a "blue".

As the universities were outside the Croyle tradition, my father was consulted ; and he advised that, as most of Dick's friends would probably be going to the House, he had better go there, if he wanted to be with them, or somewhere else, if he wished to form a new circle. Magdalen was discussed at some length, as my father's old college ; and little surprise, therefore, can have been felt when Dick ultimately went there, though he was originally intended for Christ Church and the eleventh-hour change of plan was hardly less significant than the earlier change from Winchester to Eton. Once again there was a crisis in Dick's rather troubled youth ; and once again the brief entry : "*Educ. . . . Magdalen College, Oxford*" leaves out more than it puts in.

Once again, too, unless there is an unsuspected autobiography waiting to throw light on all the mysterious passages in a life which two of my colleagues characterized as "dull and respectable", no one will ever know the whole truth, though the bare facts are soon told. In the Christmas holidays of Dick's last year at Eton, he brought a rather dare-devil friend, Hailey Stamford, to Marston ; and the two of them visited me at the vicarage to discuss Stamford's proposal that we should all three, then and there, volunteer for the war that had now been going on for two months—with a depressing lack of success for British arms—in South Africa. I had to say at once that my father would not dream of letting me throw away the chance of a scholarship at Oxford. Dick seemed hardly more sanguine ; but his case, at least as represented by Stamford, was less strong.

"You're going into the army anyhow," argued our vehement friend. "If you're thinking of your precious 'blue', you can go up when you get back. Provided you

haven't been killed. That's what *I'm* doing. Of course," he continued provocatively, as Dick remained silent, "if you care more for a thing like *cricket* . . ."

"I don't," Dick interrupted, "but there'll be a frightful shindy with my father. He was difficult enough over my chucking Sandhurst. If he thinks I don't know my own mind from one day to another . . ."

"But there wasn't a war on then!," Stamford exclaimed. "No doubt if you're *looking* for difficulties . . ."

"I'm not," Dick returned hotly. "But you don't know my father. If you like, I'll write to him . . ."

This, however, was not good enough for Stamford.

"And, if he says 'no', you'll just accept that?," he sneered. "My father has said 'no' already, but I don't let a little thing like *that* worry me. He can stop my getting a commission, but he dam' well can't stop me from enlisting. Nobody can. If you'll come with me here and now . . ."

"I must give my father the *chance* of saying 'yes'," Dick insisted.

So much for the facts as I know them at first-hand. I believe that Dick wrote to his father, who was laying siege to the War Office on his own account; I believe that Lord Alster gave a qualified consent, subject to discussion; I believe that the discussion never took place, because Dick by this time had gone away and the letter never reached him.

At second-hand, Hailey Stamford always maintained that Dick had run away, without leaving an address, to avoid receiving his father's letter. By the time he was found, Lord Alster's tentative approval had been withdrawn; and Dick was sent back to Eton with a flea in his ear. I have never heard whether he threatened to take matters into his own hands by enlisting, but the possibility of this was so obvious that any parent might have thought of it for himself.

Perhaps Colonel Stamford did : perhaps Lord Alster dropped him a hint ; conceivably Dick revealed that this would be the next line of attack. The facts of the second chapter are that Hailey Stamford, under a false name and age, presented himself at a recruiting-station and was instantly identified, ignominiously escorted home and in due course sent back to Eton, where he created a brief scandal by engaging in a fight with Dick in the streets of Windsor. " A feather for a funk " were the words on which the battle was joined ; and, though sanguinary and unscientific hitting and mauling could not be expected to establish who was in the right, they proved that in taking punishment Dick Croyle was no more of a coward—as any one might have known—than on the day when he fainted, without a murmur, from the pain of four crushed fingers.

It would be pleasant to record that honour was satisfied and the threatened friendship cemented in the blood that dyed the gutters of the High Street. Unhappily, the fight was interrupted before either could exact or offer withdrawal ; Hailey Stamford spent the remainder of his time at Eton asserting that Dick had mobilized their two families to save his bowling average, while Dick retaliated rather ineffectually by denouncing Stamford as a liar.

When he told me at the end of our last half that he was going to Magdalen, the reason advanced was that his one-time friend was going to the House.

" I *couldn't* go to the same college as a *liar* and a *scug* like that," said Dick. " I've thought, at times, of changing over to Cambridge."

It seems, then, that the " dull and respectable " reference to the late governor-general's sojourn at Eton and Magdalen is very far from telling the whole truth about his education.

CHAPTER THREE

"ELDEST SON OF SECOND VISCOUNT . . ."

I

IF Dr. Roy Hadleigh had been less generally uncommunicative, he would have written this book for me ; and perhaps he would have explained a persistent contradiction in behaviour that reads like the expression of a dual personality. The small boy who ran away from a cricket-ball and had his hand crushed without uttering a cry developed into the big boy who, by Hailey Stamford's account, ran away from "a handful of damned Dutch farmers" and stood up a few hours later to have his face pounded to pulp.

This internal conflict continued throughout Dick's life ; but I am not competent to say what caused it. Was he, in the years when I was too young to see him as more than an awkward and rather slovenly child, who had always outgrown his strength, in fact a shifty child who would have declined into something worse if he had not been taken sternly in hand ? Was he, perhaps from an obscure prenatal cause, an abnormally sensitive child who was frightened into shiftiness by the Spartan methods, the loud voices and the very inches of his overwhelming father and mother ? Was he a normal child for whom a wholly abnormal standard was set ?

Whatever the cause, the doctor had diagnosed a "complex", as we call it now, before he talked to my father about Dick's "over-anxiety" and long before he tried to resolve it. To the end of his life, though, Hadleigh

would never say more than that he had tried to "iron out some of the creases in poor Dick's young spirit"; and I can only guess at what he might have told another doctor from the hints which Flavia Wreyden let fall when in effect he called her into consultation as the one person with paramount influence over his patient.

Her name, as I have already mentioned, had not found its way into the works of reference from which I compiled my appreciation of the third Viscount Alster; and, though the industrious Captain Dutton's two volumes refer dutifully to Dick's mother, his sister, his wife and his daughter, they leave no loop-hole for the suggestion that any other woman—Egeria, Aspasia or Cleopatra—ever played any part in his life. Public men, according to the garter-robe school of biographers, fall in love at first sight and remain faithful to their wives till death parts them. If I had thought fit to ask the "cabinet meeting" at Risborough whether Flavia's return to England the week before had anything to do with Lord Alster's decision to set out forthwith to the Antipodes, I am very sure Sir John Bunting would have growled: "*Hell! Who's she, anyway?*" And I should have found it difficult to answer the question in a few words.

I find it difficult now. When I first met Flavia, I was sixteen or seventeen, she a year or two younger, and we were dining at the "Big House" in a New Year's Eve party. The Wreydens—father, mother and daughter—had lately taken one of Lord Alster's cottages on the outskirts of the village in order—said my parents—"to be near their friend Dr. Hadleigh"; and indeed, unless a man were a parson, physician or patient, some explanation was required before even a house-agent encouraged him to settle in one of the most remote villages in Dorsetshire. During the neolithic age the great Ridgeway, still trace-

able on the chalky uplands to the east, had carried its traffic from Camelot to Dungeon Hill within a mile of the “ Big House ” ; but, when Marston Abbey was wasted and the monks scattered, the only means of communication was by rutted grass-tracks from one farm to another; and, until the advent of the motor-car, the sparse inhabitants died under the same thatched roofs that had sheltered their birth.

To light unexpectedly upon an attractive neighbour of one's own age seemed, that evening, almost too good to be true. Once or twice in a century there came a new vicar or doctor, who remained “ new ” for the lifetime of all who remembered his predecessor, and at yet longer intervals some pensioner of the reigning Alster took possession of the cottage now occupied by the Wreydens ; but he was usually childless. When I heard that Flavia's father had served in the last Afghan war, I assumed that he was an army friend of our host's, perhaps fallen on evil days, but she informed me that he was a retired doctor who had given up a London practice on grounds of health and come here, as indeed I now remembered my own father had told me, to be near the man she called “ Uncle Roy ”.

Soon, tragically soon, I was to understand this desire. Jimmy Wreyden was a hopeless and incurable toper with enough decency left to surrender himself into the hands of the one friend who would keep him from getting drunk in public-houses and sleeping off his debauch in public ditches. It was Hadleigh, once a fellow-student, who had made him give up practice before he found himself prosecuted for manslaughter, Hadleigh who kept his vague and exhausted wife loyal to him, Hadleigh who was now paying for Flavia's education and had promised her work later on as his dispenser. It was Hadleigh, I believe,

who guaranteed the rent of Rose Cottage ; and, if required, I have no doubt that he would have guaranteed the behaviour of Jimmy Wreyden at dinner provided no one pressed him to drink wine when he asked—as always in public—for water.

At this first meeting I do not remember even seeing the sandy, wizened little man, with the hunted expression and the flickering eye-lids, who, with his indispensable retriever, afterwards became so familiar a figure in the lanes about Marston ; and Mrs. Wreyden, as always, had sent word at the last moment that she had one of “ her ” headaches. I sat next to Flavia, however, at dinner ; and, though it was beneath my dignity—on a night when I was wearing my first tail-coat—to fall in love with a girl whose hair still hung to her waist in a double plait, I indulged freely in the ponderous jocularly which takes the place of flirtation at that most awkward age.

“ Our latest acquisition,” was Roy Hadleigh’s form of presentation. “ I count on you, Leslie, to shew her the country.”

I said that I should be delighted. Flavia had friendly grey eyes, a friendly smiling mouth with dimples at the corners and a straight thin nose that twitched at the end, like a rabbit’s, when she was amused. She also had, unhappily still confined in those two plaits I have mentioned, the richest and darkest chestnut-red hair that I have ever seen on the head of a woman. At this time the immortal *Prisoner of Zenda* was still young ; and for the sake of the enchanting blush that any compliment conjured into her white cheeks I made much play with the “ Elphberg red ” which had caused “ Uncle Roy ” to substitute “ Flavia ” for the “ Flora ” that she had received at baptism. On the strength of my own dark hair I was christened “ Black Michael ” ; and we were

looking for a "Rudolph" and a "Rupert" to complete the cast for a series of *tableaux vivants* after dinner when Flavia interrupted herself to ask me who the queer, melancholy-looking boy was at the far end of the table.

"That?," I said. "Why, Dick, of course. The eldest son. I saw you shaking hands with him."

"I was much too excited to hear people's names!," Flavia replied. "This is my first grown-up party. Is . . . is anything the matter with him?"

"I don't think he's any different from what he usually is," I answered in some surprise, looking down the table to the place where Dick was sitting sullen and monosyllabic.

By now I was so well used to the churlish, unhappy mask which he wore at home and at school alike that I had forgotten the comparatively cheerful bearing which he had achieved intermittently in the days before what I have called "the crisis of his youth".

"He doesn't seem to be *enjoying* himself much," Flavia observed, continuing to study Dick's mournful, long face with an interest which I found wholly unnecessary.

2

If I had known Flavia then as I know her now, I might have saved myself the trouble of feeling it below my dignity to fall in love with her. From the moment that she caught sight of Dick, she had no serious attention to spare for me that night.

I must not be taken to suggest that she lost her heart to him then or later: perhaps life might have been more satisfactory for all three of us if she had. I mean that she could not bear the sight of unhappiness in people who—as she would say—had "no business to be unhappy";

and no one, surely, had any business to be unhappy on an evening like this, when she was herself wild with excitement at a dinner party, a new dress, her first visit to the "Big House" (which was in those days like one's first command to Windsor). How often in the next few years I was to see the same clouding of her soft grey eyes as she broke from me to find partners for a less attractive girl! How often I was to hear her whisper of some ill-favoured youth: "*He* doesn't seem to be having much of a time! D'you think he'd like to dance with me till he finds some one he knows?" I think I told her that Dick abominated parties, for she certainly asked me why, then, he did not go to bed. I explained that Lord Alster would never allow this; and I remember that a long silence followed as she set herself to think of my friend no longer as one of two score boys and girls between twelve and eighteen, but as the heir to Marston Abbas and the son of the formidable warrior half-way down the other side of the table.

"I shouldn't care much about having to *live* here," she murmured with a little grimace that shewed how her thoughts had been occupied. "Too much like the Tower of London."

"And I suppose Dick will have to live there too for a time," I began, "when he goes into the Guards . . ." I had always taken for granted the old muzzle-loading guns and piled shot on the terraces, the lances and swords in the hall and the tattered flags hanging over our heads now, but I could see that to a new-comer they must be strongly reminiscent of a museum. "If you're at all interested in these things . . .," I continued with a feeling that she ought to be.

"I'm not!", Flavia interrupted with a shudder. "I think it's all rather horrible."

In such a house at such a time, when Kipling was our evangelist and my gentle mother herself taught the village schoolchildren to sing *The Soldiers of the Queen*, this was strange hearing. I could not be expected to know that Dr. Wreyden had learnt to drink under the strain of the '78 campaign in Afghanistan.

"You wouldn't mind seeing this country invaded . . . ?," I asked.

"Oh, to defend yourself . . .," Flavia conceded.

"And to keep civilization going," I insisted with the confidence of one who has been taught to divide the world between the British and those backward or turbulent races whom it was their mission to protect. "I don't know what you think would happen to India . . ."

Dr. Hadleigh leant across the table to bid Flavia listen attentively.

"You'll find Leslie very eloquent on 'the White Man's Burden'," he told her with an ironical solemnity that pricked my heroics. "'What would happen to India', you were saying?"

If Flavia was spared a second-hand lecture on the fate that—according to Lord Alster—was awaiting every virgin and every rupee on the day that British troops were withdrawn from Bengal, she had the doctor to thank for her escape; but I am afraid she was not spared a long-drawn wrangle in which Hadleigh explored my second-hand ideas of imperialism. Why, he challenged me to say, did states feel obliged to keep up great armies and navies when the component parts of them had all disarmed?

"Before Kent and Northumbria and Wessex and Mercia were all united . . .," he went on.

"If Europe were one whole," I answered, "a police-force might be enough. As long as any country's exposed to attack, though, it must defend itself."

"And, as long as any country can defend itself, it can attack its neighbour," said the doctor. "I suppose the men of the Heptarchy talked like you. Till the Danes gave them something else to think about. And I suppose Germans and Frenchmen and Russians are talking at this moment about their 'burdens', they've all people that they insist on 'protecting' before somebody else gobbles them up. I daresay," he continued cynically, "they've all spare sons to plant in the countries they're civilizing. Algeria, Manchuria, Togoland. Not to mention surplus goods to sell 'em. Missionaries to convert them. However, as I shall be dead before we outgrow the Heptarchy frame of mind in Europe . . ."

"Do you mean we only have an army because other nations . . .?," Flavia began, with a cast back to the beginning of the doctor's homily.

She spoke as though this were an entirely new idea to her; and in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign, before we had begun to talk of the "race in armaments", it was a new idea to most people other than Quakers and "cranks". Had the doctor been a man of my own age, I should have called him a "radical" to his face (I had never met the breed, though we had a few desperate "liberals" at Eton); but to hang this label round the neck of a practising professional man in those days would have been as near actionable as to call him a "communist" now. Besides, Hadleigh was always saying that doctors had no politics. My father said the same of parsons; and Lord Alster of soldiers. I fancy it would have been hard to find three more heated partisans in one small village, but two of the three justified themselves by explaining that the crown, the church, the armed forces, the empire, the existing constitution, "fair" trade and the union were outside politics. The third merely

laughed ; and I am afraid that in time I came to laugh with him.

At this New Year's Eve party, however, when I wished to recapture Flavia's wandering attention, I felt that the doctor with his mischievous twinkle and mocking voice had to be annihilated and that I—Heaven help me!—was the person to do it. I remember (still with perhaps redeeming shame) delivering a debating-society speech about "the lessons of history", the "*pax Romana*", Gibbon's panegyric on the Antonines and the criminal lunacy of Mr. Gladstone's last government. I ended impressively with the somewhat hackneyed warning: "*Si pacem velis, para bellum*"; and I was suitably humbled when Flavia asked me to translate it for her.

The doctor, I fear, was more effective in fewer words.

"I can't compete with you on 'all history'," he told me ironically, "but I submit that our wars with Philip and Louis and Napoleon were all precipitated by countries that had prepared for peace so well that their neighbours combined against them before they were mopped up. See that the same fate doesn't overtake *you*, if you aim at a *pax Britannica*! However, this is a barren theme. I said I wanted you to take charge of Flavia these holidays, Leslie: you can have the dog-cart when I'm not using it. If we get any skating . . ."

The conversation swung to the great frost of '94, when an ice-carnival had been held on the lake at Marston ; and several years were to pass before it occurred to me that the theme which the doctor had just dismissed was perhaps less barren than he thought. I am not sure that I did not this night sow in Flavia's mind the seed of a lesson which she handed on to Dick. "An army so strong that no one would dare to attack you", Kipling's *Army of a Dream*, "Lord Roberts' "Nation In Arms" formed

the inspiration of his otherwise sterile years in the House of Commons ; and I have always believed that the idea of entering parliament to preach this crusade came to him from her.

All this, however, lay deep in the future on the night when I tried to interest Flavia in myself and she persisted in being so much more interested in Dick. I say again that it was still an impersonal interest and that she was sorry for John and Philip as well as for Dick : when Lord Alster rapped on the table and stood up, glass in hand, to propose " The Queen ! ", all three of them pulled off their cracker caps and sprang to their feet, murmuring " The Queen ! The Queen, God bless her ! ", and I thought I saw mild wonder in Flavia's observant grey eyes that any one should think it necessary to drink any one's health at a private dinner in a private house. At some time, I daresay she was reflecting, all three boys must have been told : "*When your soveran's health is given, you spring to attention ! Hold yourself erect ! Don't mumble as though you were ashamed of her !*"; and, though the younger sons took it all as part of the day's work, I daresay Hadleigh had already grumbled in her hearing—as in mine—that "the Lord Panjandrum" had a rare aptitude for robbing games and parties of their "fun". How often had I heard him say :

" It's a pity poor Dick was never allowed to forget that he was the eldest son and that there was a world waiting for his young hand to shape, not to mention a grave to be watered by a nation's tears ! "

3

If it was a quality that I can only call sunshine of spirit, a feeling that happiness was as much a necessity as air, that aroused Flavia to an interest in Dick, it was a queer

mixture of indignation, pity and disgust that stirred Dick to an interest in Flavia.

I am not sure that they exchanged a word that night, but a day or two later he visited me—with a face of thunder—and confided the appalling news that, when calling at Rose Cottage with an invitation to shoot, he had caught a glimpse of Dr. Wreyden drunk and insensible, with Roy Hadleigh in attendance. Worse than this, the man was apparently an habitual drunkard. Worse still : so far as Dick knew, hardly any one else had any suspicion of this.

"Then how have *you* . . . ?," I began, too much startled to think of anything else.

"Dr. Hadleigh told me," he answered. "And I . . . Well, I *think* he meant me to tell you, but you know the way he talks, half ragging all the time ?"

"What did he say ?"

"Oh, that he'd been thinking . . . About you and me . . . Why one of us should be fairly useful at cricket . . ."

"While the other is completely useless," I said, as he hesitated.

"He said he'd been wondering why people should be left-handed," Dick continued. "No cleverness of *mine*. I said, of course not. He seemed in a pretty foul temper, for some reason. Then he asked if I thought it was any cleverness of yours that gave you the trick of things like Latin verses. If not, it seemed to be just the act of God I agreed ; and he cooled down a bit. 'It's an act of God too,' he said, 'if a man's born with only one hand, isn't it ? Anyway, it's not our affair. *We* don't go up into the Temple and thank God we are not like him. There may be a purpose in it, God may be giving other people a chance of coming out strong, like that fellow in Dickens.

We can *help*, to the best of our ability.' And then he turned me round by the shoulders and pushed me out. It's pretty damned awful, isn't it ? "

My first feeling—the human young¹ being as inquisitive as kittens or puppies about what does not concern them—was one of satisfied curiosity: I now knew why the Wreydens had buried themselves at Marston, "to be near their friend Dr. Hadleigh ". It was followed—the human young being ever on the defensive—by one of self-righteousness: an educated man, a gentleman, should be above a weakness that put him on a level with the half-witted village sot who was my father's heaviest cross. Then, I am thankful to say, these mean emotions were swamped as I thought of the gay, delightful daughter I had met at dinner a few nights before.

" It's pretty damned awful for Mrs. Wreyden and the girl," I said.

" Thank the Lord the fellow didn't get tight before all those people," Dick muttered, splashing heavily through the flooded lane at the back of the vicarage. " I suppose your father didn't *know* . . . Why the doctor didn't *tell* him . . . "

The uneasy, incomplete sentences were tinged with resentment. Dr. Hadleigh ought to have warned my father against Wreyden ; my father, as chaplain at the " Big House ", could then have warned Lord Alster ; and Flavia, with whom I had discussed *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Flavia with the " Elphberg-red " hair, Flavia whom I was to take about the country, would not have been invited.

" What the deuce was there to tell ?," I asked angrily. " Wreyden behaved all right, didn't he ? "

" You can't count on it, apparently. And my father's most frightfully down on that sort of thing."

"Then you'd better get him to fit them out with hoods and bells," I said, with a memory of Stevenson's *Black Arrow*. "'Unclean! Unclean!'"

"There's no need to lose *all* your hair," Dick informed me coldly.

I thought of Flavia as I had seen her at her "first grown-up party", too excited to hear any one's name, radiant in her new dress and then suddenly quite miserable because one person—who happened to be Dick!—did not seem to be enjoying himself. I thought of her now, wringing her hands at Rose Cottage, or perhaps walking alone, under orders to keep away till the trouble was over, crying possibly.

"There jolly well is, when you talk like that!", I retorted. "Aren't your people old enough to look after themselves? If you're too big a fool to think of Mrs. Wreyden and the girl . . ."

"I wish I knew why you were getting into such a sweat over the business," he murmured.

"Because *you* look like playing just the *stinking* Pharisee that Hadleigh told you not to be!", I said. "To cold-shoulder a girl on her *father's* account . . . My people are just as much 'down on that sort of thing', as you call it . . ."

"Then what d'you propose to do?"

Obviously, Dick wanted to know what I should do if my father tried to put Rose Cottage out of bounds for me; but, though I enjoyed the heroic vision of myself championing Flavia against a hostile world, I found it easier to pretend he was thinking about this moment.

"I'm going to see if she'd care for a walk. It's all rot, Dick . . . I mean, *she's* quite a decent kid. Are you coming? If you are, you can ask her to tea and shew her the museum . . ."

"I don't know about my people . . . The fellow seemed to be raving when I went by that way this morning."

"All the more reason for getting her out of it all!," I cried.

It was in this fashion that Flavia Wreyden came into Dick's life. The two-volume biography, true to convention, is more concerned with the wife than the third viscount married than with the girl he might have married; and at no time can there have been more than two or three people, of whom Dick unhappily was one, to regard Flavia as a possible match. It was, I imagine, her utter impossibility that persuaded the Alsters to tolerate her when she was of marriageable age, though they made her welcome in the first instance from pure kindness of heart. News travels quickly in a village the size of Marston; and they had heard all about Dr. Wreyden by the time his rather white and tremulous daughter was brought up for tea. Lord Alster unbent figuratively and bent literally to put himself on a friendly level with a girl who seemed pathetically small and alone in the midst of that towering family and household; and Lady Alster, keeping her till nearly dressing-time, suggested with an admirable air of improvisation that she should dine and spend the night there.

Flavia said this was impossible: her mother would be anxious.

"My father's not very well," she explained, her steady grey eyes looking up straight into Lady Alster's. "He gets these attacks . . . But if I may come again? Dick hasn't shewn me half the things yet."

"Come whenever you like, my dear," said Lord Alster gruffly. "Always delighted to see you. Very pleasant for my young people to have some one of their own age . . ."

As at this date their ages ranged from twelve to seventeen there could not have seemed any great imprudence in the invitation, though I doubt not that in the course of the next few years Lord Alster often looked sorrowfully back and traced “Dick’s trouble”, as he called it, to this day. And I? There were to be many occasions on which I cried to Heaven: “If I hadn’t shoved her down his throat . . .”

4

When did it really begin, this intimacy that Dick’s parents came to regard as a strange disease which he might outgrow and to which he certainly must not give in?

I cannot say, though I was seeing him for three hundred and sixty days in every year. Flavia cannot say. And, if Dick were alive now, I doubt if he could say how or when he overcame his shyness of women or admitted Flavia to confidences that he withheld even from Roy Hadleigh. From the moment when Lord Alster lowered his defences, throughout the rest of our time at Eton and the whole of our time at Oxford, we seemed to live in an inseparable group of three, four or six until our parties, for one reason or another, all came to an end.

I say “for one reason or another”, because I shall never know if they died a natural death or were deliberately knocked on the head by the Alsters. Our old alliance must inevitably have weakened as we scattered in pursuit of our own careers: in the first years of the nineteenth-hundreds John and Philip, significantly avoiding Winchester, passed from Wellington to Sandhurst; Margaret disappeared abroad to learn languages; Dick and I went from Oxford to London. And yet, as any one but a blind man must have seen that he was changing out of recog-

nition in these years, it seems fair to assume that his parents debated from time to time whether this intimacy should be discouraged, but I defy any one to say when it could first be called an intimacy.

The truth, I suppose, is that no one bothered very much about us and that we bothered very little about ourselves in the period that Captain Dutton dismisses briefly as *Childhood and Adolescence*. Two years in the Eton eleven, one distinguished and one rather ignominious appearance against Harrow, the ultimate glory of "Pop"; this is all that he sees fit to say and I can only supplement his account with a fight in the streets of Windsor. Again, of Oxford we can only chronicle two years in the cricket eleven, membership of the Bullingdon, an invitation to play for "the Gentlemen" and a hunting accident that ruined the third season. In life, one's five or six years at a public school, one's three or four years at a university are so much less eventful and formative than in a novel, where I find the generality of characters more sensitive and introspective than the schoolboys and undergraduates that I have actually met; and even at the time I felt that Dick Croyle's spiritual growth was taking place at home and largely out of sight.

If I have to give a date, I should choose the morning when Roy Hadleigh "aired" his "views" outside a *café* in Bruges and I should then skip several years to the day when Dick found in Flavia Wreyden a confidante before whom he could think aloud; but I cannot say when this was. In one of our first holidays together I reminded Flavia of the doctor's request that I should shew her the country, adding caustically that my services were apparently no longer required, but she disarmed me by saying that she was really the only person to whom Dick ever opened his mouth and that I, with two parents

to whom I could say anything, must be generous to those who were less fortunately placed.

"There's something so crushing about Lord Alster," she continued. "He goes through life like a . . . like a *Juggernaut* . . . Dick's lonely. So am I. That sort of makes it easy . . ."

After this, the next salient date that I remember is the morning when Flavia burst into my little green-panelled study at the vicarage, her grey eyes dark with excitement and her pale face flushed with anger, to ask if I had heard "the Juggernaut's latest". It was the last day of those troubled Christmas holidays that had witnessed Dick's rather unenthusiastic effort to get out with Hailey Stamford to South Africa and for the last week he had been writing to all the people whom he had warned that he might be leaving, now briefly and humbly telling them that he was returning to Eton after all.

"Brute!", Flavia exclaimed, shaking a small clenched fist in the direction of the "Big House"; then in passionate entreaty: "Can't your father do something, Leslie? Dick feels this most *frightfully*."

"I'm afraid," I answered, "it was intended that he should. Discipline."

"Then I shall see Lord Alster myself! He's not *fit* . . ."

Flavia was now a year older than at our first meeting; and she had put up her hair. She was more than a year taller and prettier. In spite of this, however, I did not think that Dick's parents would feel she was entitled to lecture them on his upbringing.

"You know what sticklers they are," I said. "If you've asked for beef, you'll be given beef. *Why* Dick disappeared without leaving an address . . ."

"I should have thought *that* was fairly obvious!", Flavia broke in. "To any one who knows him . . ."

"I've known him about eighteen times as long as you," I returned. "*Lately*, I admit . . ."

Before I could say anything more, Flavia had put her hand over my mouth.

"You're being silly," she warned me, "and if you aren't careful . . . Surely you're not *jealous* because Dick sometimes talks to me instead of always playing Jonathan to your David?"

"No, I'm not in the least jealous of you," I said.

"Well, you can't be jealous of *him*. And yet I believe you are!" For all her intuition, I do not think it had occurred to her that she could be a figure of romance to either of us. "Leslie! This is absurd! Oh, don't spoil things! We're such friends!"

I believe I asked what good "friendship" was to anybody, but for the last minute or two I seemed to have strayed into some fourth dimension and my voice sounded as if it belonged to some one else. I wanted to say things that I had read in novels—things that I did not believe anybody actually said—, but it was the wrong moment, when I was going back to Eton within an hour; the wrong place, too, when the floor was littered with the school-books of a schoolboy. And Flavia was a schoolgirl, younger than me, though she contrived to remain firmly within the usual three dimensions.

"It's friends . . . as long as I'm allowed . . . or nothing," she answered deliberately, turning to the window and speaking through her teeth. "The sooner you understand *that* . . . *Both* of you. Please don't forget who I am and *what* I am." There was a long silence; and I saw her shoulders rising and falling. "And now I can't remember what I was trying to say! Oh, yes! Dick . . . You *don't* understand him. And yet it was you, who told me about his smashing his hand that time."

"What *that* has to do with it . . .," I began.

Flavia strolled to the open door of the room that I called my "study" and that every one else continued to call "the old nursery". Shutting it, she came back to the fire and curled herself on a worn footstool.

"You'd never think, to see him at Lord's, that he'd ever run away from fast bowling," she murmured, staring raptly into the flames. "His first impulse *always* . . . *That's* why he disappeared these holidays . . ."

"You mean he was running away?," I asked incredulously.

The red-chestnut head bent slowly :

"Of course he didn't *tell* me so. He never told me the *whole* story of that ghastly business at Winchester."

I was too much astounded to wonder what he had said or how he had brought himself to say anything. If Flavia had suggested that Dick was afraid of doing himself less than justice, I might have agreed with her ; but no one who had seen him being taught to ride or swim would have thought him capable of running away from anything through fear.

"If you'd seen him when he smashed his hand . . .," I began.

"Oh, he screws himself up to a terrific effort sometimes. And sometimes he just can't. When he slipped away these holidays . . ."

"But he came back within a week ! If that infernal letter hadn't arrived so promptly . . ."

"Yes, he comes back. When he finds that running away is worse than the other thing, that he's hurting himself inside . . . General Lord Alster's *son* !" Flavia sprang to her feet and caught my arm as though she must shake her meaning into me. "And, *when* he comes back, the Juggernaut treats him like a child who turns

up at table with dirty hands ! It makes me so mad ! Now he's been given another thing to be afraid of ! He'll be afraid to pull himself up and try to do his best. . . . Swear you'll never tell him I've talked to you like this, Leslie ! ”

“ Am I likely to ? ,” I asked. “ For one thing, it's all the most utter . . . Well, I won't say that, but you seem to have made up a marvellous story about him . . . ”

Flavia shook her head and turned again to the window :

“ You wouldn't think it marvellous if you were in my place. When you see some one fighting, fighting, *fighting* . . . Refusing to give in, though he's wearing himself out . . . Oh, why can't the title and everything go to John ? Dick would be all right if people would only leave him alone. Now . . . Can't your father do something ? ”

“ The mess is *made*, ” I answered. “ The only thing you can do is to tell Dick not to mind. When he comes back next holidays . . . ”

“ If I'm still here, ” Flavia murmured.

“ Of course you'll be here ! ,” I said.

“ There's no ' of course ' about anything, Leslie, ” she sighed, “ where I'm concerned. ”

5

Dick had gone back to Eton by an earlier train—I am afraid, chiefly to avoid travelling with me—and I had the whole of a long and complicated journey, with several changes, in which to think over my conversation with Flavia.

Her phrase about “ who and what ” she was troubled an imagination that up to that time had not been seriously exercised. That anybody should go through life under an unmerited blight offended my sense of fairness ; but my imagination was more severely troubled by the vision

of Flavia at the window, already looking back on the life that she had still to lead. Though she changed her name and went to live at the other side of the world, her brand would go with her and she would be recognized as “ the daughter of a disreputable old dipsomaniac ”. I tried to think what my own feelings would be if I had to be known all my days as “ *Leslie Vivian, the son of that man who did time, you remember . . .* ”

Of her father Flavia spoke always as “ an invalid ” ; but she spoke of him so seldom that I had almost persuaded myself she hardly ever thought of him. I now recognized that she brooded over him night and day. If she understood Dick, it was because she understood the type of man whose curse it was to fight everlastingly against a weakness that was mastering him. And this brought me to Dick, the new Dick that I had been invited to contemplate, a Dick at once finer and less fine, a Dick ten thousand times more complex, than the Dick whom I seemed to know so well and to whom, in circumstances of suspicion, I had always given the benefit of the doubt.

My first feeling was that Flavia’s explanation was all rather too simple to be true. Granted that the Alsters imposed a Spartan standard, the others—John, Philip and Margaret—had no difficulty in living up to it ; and, if they escaped the oppressive destiny that hung over their eldest brother’s head, I could not see that his preparation for it was unduly harsh. For moral or physical slackness—and the overgrown, awkward Dick seemed undeniably slack—there was only one treatment in the last years of the eighteen-nineties ; and in the middle years of the nineteen-thirties, when we are so busily shedding our inhibitions as to forget that civilized man has only emerged from the savage by cultivating his inhibitory power, I am not sure that we were wrong. If, said Lord Alster, you

are afraid of deep water, you must be thrown into it until you overcome your fear. If you are afraid of fast bowling, said Roy Hadleigh, you must overcome your fear by telling yourself that, though you may be hurt, the pain will be something that you can bear. If, I am myself tempted to say, you draw back every time you are afraid, you will come to fear more and more things. Flavia, with her talk of "terrific efforts" and subsequent prostration, seemed to argue that the last state was worse than the first; and I suppose we shall go to our graves without agreeing.

I did not agree, in my deserted third-class carriage, that Dick's "first impulse" was always to run away; and I agreed still less a few hours later when he demonstrated in the blood-stained streets of Windsor that no one could with impunity call him a coward. Very soon, however, I had dismissed Dick as a problem that I could not hope to solve and was thinking of Flavia. That morning I had seen her illumined, tragic and haggard, as by a single flash of lightning; I felt that I should always see her like that now. "'You're not *jealous*, are you?'" I repeated to myself and drew what satisfaction I could from the knowledge that she only encouraged Dick to pour out his troubled heart because she only had won his confidence. Alas, she had instantly added that neither of us need be jealous of the other! "'Who and what I am . . .'" She would be a friend to us both so long as she was "allowed"; but there was no "of course" about anything that happened to her and it rested with others to say how long she would be allowed to remain a friend.

It rested with others to say whether I should even find her at Marston when I came home for the Easter holidays; and, remembering her bent head and drooping

back as she stared with smouldering eyes into the fire, I suddenly discovered that life would be intolerable if I returned home in three months' time to find that she had vanished. I was in love with her, I wanted to protect her. And then, as I saw her once more curled on the footstool in front of my fire, I saw once more my tattered Homer and my expurgated Juvenal. Poor Dick, in the train ahead of mine, might feel fairly savage at being sent back to school, but I vowed that I had a better reason.

The Wreydens were still at Rose Cottage when I came home for my next holidays ; and Flavia was still “ allowed ” to be friends with us. And why not ? To Dick at this time she was only a habit ; and he did not think of her as more than a habit till he was faced with the threat of losing her. She continued to be friends with us when we gave parties for Eights' Week and Commemoration ; she interrupted her dispenser's training to attend the coming-of-age celebrations at Marston ; and I should be hard put to it to say when I detected a change of attitude in Dick's parents or when this produced a change of attitude in him. Was it when Flavia appeared officially for the first time in Roy Hadleigh's surgery, thereby proclaiming herself a grown woman with her living to earn ? Was it when Dick and I came down after our final schools and were proclaimed grown men with careers to pursue ?

Looking back, I seem to remember a hint of coming changes when Hadleigh told me that last summer that, if I wanted to ask Flavia up for my last Commemoration, he could easily get on without her for a few days.

“ I expect she'll be with Dick's party,” I said. “ She always has been.”

“ And, if you live long enough,” said the doctor, “ you'll

find that, because a thing *has* been, that's no reason why it should be again. The daily rising of the sun . . . If you live *long* enough . . ."

"I'll find out what Dick's arranging," I promised.

"Do! As a final fling . . . I shouldn't like Flavia to miss it; and if the Panjandruns would only understand that she's under *no* illusions . . ."

"I don't think I follow," I said.

The doctor laughed.

"And I don't think I can help you much," he answered. "I suppose some old pandar has been asking if there's anything serious between Dick and the lovely young creature he always goes about with. As though Flavia would *look* at him! As though he *thought* of her in that way! It's amazing, friend Leslie, how many priceless friendships are ruined by people who try to make something more of them. Dick and Flavia, Dick and you, you and Flavia . . ."

He paused as though he expected some criticism; but I was digesting the strange idea that Dick was now old enough to marry.

"Has anything . . . *happened*?" I asked.

"Not that I know of," the doctor answered. "Except that we've all been growing more self-conscious. Master Dick is now the Honourable Richard Croyle. Eldest son of the second viscount. All that sort of thing. He must be careful how he behaves. Not fair on a girl, you know, to raise expectations that can lead to nothing."

When I sounded Dick, I was told—rather shortly—that everything would be as we had arranged it months earlier: his mother was coming up to chaperon Margaret, John was getting leave from Sandhurst and, "of course" Flavia would be there.

"We've done everything together for so long now," he

added, “ that it’ll be quite strange . . . I suppose the doctor will give her a holiday sometimes.”

It was this brief, meditative speech that I had in mind when I said that Dick did not begin to fall in love with Flavia till he was faced with the threat of losing her. Maybe he would have felt no threat if his parents had not hinted that “ the eldest son of the second viscount ” should take stock of his position ; and, if so, it was their anxiety to keep the two of them apart that ultimately forced them so unnecessarily, so tragically and so uselessly together. It is hardly the business of reference-books to say categorically why a certain man married a certain woman ; but, if Dick had enlarged the entry about Felicity, daughter of Ogden B. Tann, I think he might have said that he married her because by then he did not care any longer whom he married.

CHAPTER FOUR

“ M.P. (CONSERVATIVE), NORTH-EAST DORSETSHIRE . . . ”

I

I HAVE never understood why Dick Croyle's association with the Brigade of Guards receives no mention in Captain Dutton's *Life*. He entered it at the time and in the manner that had been arranged for him in boyhood ; and, though he resigned his commission after a year or two, the circumstances of his leaving were entirely creditable.

A possible explanation is that by contrast with his three or four years in France, including the wounds and decorations and “ mentions ”, the routine of Bank guards and king's guards seemed hardly to be serious soldiering ; but the Great War was still a decade ahead of us when Dick made his first appearance in *Who's Who* and I should have thought that in the eyes of Lord Alster a few years of service the moment a young man's education was supposed to be complete appeared as natural and inevitable as the earlier years at a public school. Why mention the one and not the other ?

Captain Dutton, after the chapters on Dick's nonage which I have been trying to supplement, goes straight on to *The House of Commons* ; and I should be little surprised to learn that he had never heard of the intervening time which his subject spent between Wellington Barracks and the Tower. It can hardly be argued that Lord Alster was disappointed at this change of plans, for I have

it on the best authority that, when his uncle, old Benjamin Croyle, began to fail about 1903, he himself suggested that the family seat should be occupied by the only one of his sons who was at present old enough. Those who knew Dick best might feel that he was glad enough to forget an interlude of what he must have regarded as futility and frustration, but I still do not consider this a valid reason for suppressing all reference to his service. Fully a third of my friends must have wasted, as they would say, as much time at the bar or in the civil service before discovering their true vocation ; but they are quite frank about these false starts. When Dick decided to expunge certain years from his life, he may have told his father that they were not worth recording, but I suspect that he had a more compelling reason.

Shall I say that he was once again the victim of a crisis ? If so, it was a private one, in which nobody else was involved : a mental revolution and a spiritual conflict between the two halves of his dual personality, which in great measure I watched without understanding. When we came down from Oxford, I obtained my father's permission to try my luck in Fleet Street ; and for the twelve months before I was invited to join the staff of the *Morning Standard* Dick and I were dining together three and four times a week. Almost from the first I doubted whether he was altogether happy in his new surroundings : he detested the formal pleasures of the great world and was too shy for the furtive pleasures of the half-world, he did not seem to be making friends among his brother-officers and he was obviously missing the friends that he had made at Oxford. Whenever he was on guard at Saint James' Palace, he insisted on my being his guest ; and, though his speech and manner were a model of stereotyped correctness, I felt that he

was less a guardsman than an actor playing a guardsman's part.

When I dined with him alone at the Bank of England, he was less a guardsman than a Hyde-Park orator in a guardsman's uniform.

"If I had my way . . .," he would begin with cold venom. "What the army wants . . . The trouble with our present system . . ."

For a time I thought he was only suffering from the same complaint as a number of my other friends who had left Oxford with university commissions. At this time the man who passed from school to Sandhurst and from Sandhurst into the army would normally find himself three or four years ahead of one who went from school into the army by way of a university. The system pressed hardest on those, like Dick, who had cut a big figure at Eton and Oxford, though a congenital respect for discipline would have made it easier for him to put up with this than for most men. What he found quite intolerably irksome was the loss of intellectual seniority; and the crisis at which I have hinted first became apparent to me when he complained that he had been forced back to the level of a fifth-form boy.

"Musical comedy, the turf, hunting," he enumerated as the permitted subjects of conversation. "No politics, of course, No religion. No 'shop'. God knows I don't call myself brainy, but if you've read an honour-school, even though you only got a third . . ."

"I suppose you're not *forbidden* to read," I said. "Provided you keep it to yourself, like some kind of secret vice . . ."

"Are you to keep all your opinions to yourself?," he interrupted. "Even when you're off duty? Even when they have nothing to do with religion or the other

things? If so, I'd better clear out before I'm court-martialled for going berserk."

"What's been happening?," I asked.

Dick stabbed savagely with his fork at the table-cloth provided for his use by the Governor and Court of the Bank of England.

"So far as I can make out," he growled, with his lower lip thrust truculently forward, "*I'm* wrong and the senior subaltern's right *because* he's the senior subaltern. 'No argument, please! I have spoken.' But, when the senior subaltern bumps up against a captain, the captain's right. *Because* he's a captain. I suppose I'm still wrong, as a matter of rank, and certainly I shall be wrong when our captain is reversed on appeal by a major, though the major will be wrong if the colonel says so. Talk about infallibility! The pope isn't in it with our colonel. And, mark you, this hasn't anything to do with our job. I don't want to argue with my superior officer about an order he's given. The other night we were wrangling over this new play at the Duke of York's . . ."

"General John Challoner?," I asked. "I've not seen it."

"Well, it's about the Mutiny, you know. I used to think India was a sort of family preserve and I loosed off something about the rotten play, slating it. Purely a matter of *fact*, you understand: a tissue of mistakes that no writer could make after reading a line of Kaye and Malleeson . . ."

"Did you quote your authority? "

"I thought it was some one's turn to be snubbed," Dick grunted. "When the senior subaltern had finished wiping the floor with me, a gallant captain came to my rescue and wiped the floor with the senior subaltern. Then the colonel weighed in; and you'd have thought

there was nothing more to be said. The adjutant said it, though—he must have been a bit above himself, flown with wine or something—, and brought a fat book along to prove he was right. Our colonel didn't look at the book. Not necessary. He just said: 'It's wrong'; and we all agreed and the adjutant apologized. I'm not trying to pull your leg, Leslie: truth is a matter of seniority, the value of your opinion depends on your rank . . ."

"So you need only wait till you're senior subaltern to get your revenge," I said by way of comforting him.

"I shan't wait," Dick answered. "If this is the army . . . You must picture the rot spreading upwards, from colonels to generals and from generals to field-m Marshals. No wonder we came to grief in South Africa! . . . My God, if I had my way, I'd abolish Sandhurst, abolish seniority, have a qualifying exam. every six months to shew whether a man's fit to *retain* whatever rank he's reached . . . Any business would be bankrupt in a week on the lines we follow in the army. And, by Jove, if we ever got landed in a big war . . ."

2

At the time I did not pay much attention to this outburst. A mood of general dissatisfaction was common enough in the first years after the death of Queen Victoria; and our long-drawn failure in South Africa had shaken the faith which Mr. Kipling once taught us to place in the mythically keen and intelligent officers of a long untested army.

With our crumbling belief in our own invincibility there crumbled something of our belief in a divine mission to dragoon the blind heathen who bowed down to wood

and stone instead of keeping his side-arms clean ; and Dick's voice sounded like one of the great chorus now clamouring for "efficiency" at the beat of Lord Rosebery's *baton*. I tried to comfort him by talking of the new spirit that he would find animating the army when the War Office commission had reported, but I was soon to find that his disillusion was fundamental. Our conversation, from the moment when we sat down to dinner in the silent, ghostly Bank to the moment when I was turned out into the silent, deserted streets, ranged from public-school education to the party system and from the teaching of history to the evils of industrialism. Little survived and less escaped Dick's mordant analysis. He had no remedy, to be sure ; but no more had any one else. *Was* the battle of Waterloo won on the playing-fields of Eton ? The Duke of Wellington thought so ; but Mr. Kipling would have us see all who disported themselves there as "*flannelled fools*" and "*muddied oafs*". We might talk of our "imperial mission" ; but, when we tried to carry it out, we "*fawned on the Younger Nations*", as he sneered, "*for the men who could ride and shoot.*"

And, though we had "*had no end of a lesson*", Dick was not ready to believe that it would "*make us an empire yet*" or that, if it did, the world would be any the better.

"I went up for the National this spring," he told me in support of this rather surprising avowal. "First time I'd ever seen our great industrial north. I remembered hearing from my father that, if anything happened to India, it would be all up with Lancashire, but, my God, when I saw the slums there, I wondered if it wouldn't be a good thing to wipe the whole place out. I wondered, too, what shadow of right *we* had to be laying down the

law. 'Physician, heal thyself', what? When we've sores like that all over our back . . ."

"Did you try this kind of thing on your father?," I asked.

Dick subjected the uncomplaining table-cloth to a final stab and then surrendered his fork.

"Would you try it on yours?," he challenged me. "The next time he gives out that the offertory is for foreign missions? I came in for one of the Scotland Road fights when I was in Liverpool. Broken bottles and stones. Protestants and Catholics lamming one another to shew that their God is the god of love. I felt at the time that if your father and his missionaries brought a few benighted heathen to see Christianity in practical working . . . Our parents are still living in the smug nineteenth century. My father still says 'The Queen, God bless her!' and has to correct himself. The new reign, the new century, the new state of things that that foul war has brought about . . ."

"I don't call it foul," I objected, "if it has the effect of waking us up."

"It's waked up all Europe," Dick retorted, "to what we are. Lath painted to look like iron. I wonder the French didn't have a smack at us. To avenge Fashoda and all that sort of thing. We were pretty unpopular."

"They taught me at Oxford," I said, "that the Franco-German war was the last we should see in Europe. Our civilization's too delicate and complicated for another. If we fight anywhere, it'll be in Egypt, East Africa, on the north-west Frontier. No, I suppose you can't take in new ideas after a certain age . . ."

I broke off to recall the last New Year's Eve dinner that I had attended at the "Big House". Had I any skill with a pencil, I should present it symbolically as

The Twentieth Century arriving in Marston Abbas; and I should choose the moment when Lord Alster, very martial and spare, wiped his long white moustaches and stood up, raising a glass to his aquiline nose and booming: "*Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen! I beg your pardon! The King! The King, God bless him!*" The trip of the tongue would indeed pass almost unnoticed, for the essential satire which Dick and I both felt was that two-thirds of those present had failed to observe that the Victorian era was behind them. At the other end of the long table under the double line of tattered flags, Lady Alster would rise majestically like Britannia offering her sons to Empire or the Spirit of Service. My father and mother would echo the toast, with an intenser reverence in their "*God bless him*", as though they were on faintly privileged terms with the Almighty; and Dick and I, John and Philip, Margaret and Flavia should all stand to attention with shoulders squared, as we had been taught from childhood. Only as we sat down would one or two of us reflect that we had parted company from our elders; they were staying behind in the safe and certain nineteenth century, while we stumbled into the unknown.

"Stumbled" I say, because for Dick at least the dual personality allowed him to preserve mutually destructive faiths in different parts of his brain at the same time. He was disgusted, at this far-away dinner in the brooding silences of the Bank, with his first taste of the army; but he told me impatiently not to be a fool when I suggested he should throw it up. He would groan at one moment: "If we were ever landed in a big war . . ."; and at the next he would be saying that there was no hope for an army when it knew that it would never have to fight. He had been taught by Hadleigh and Flavia to think for

himself, but he had no patience with the "radical rot" that he unconsciously assimilated from them.

A week or two after this dinner I was offered a position on the *Morning Standard*; and, returning to Marston for the first time since our last commemoration ball, I called with Dick at the dispensary and invited Flavia to congratulate me.

"I'm sorry it's not the *Daily News* or the *Chronicle*," was her first comment. "Still, if you can let some daylight into the grimy windows of the *Standard* . . . 'Educating your party' it's called. You're not really half such an obscurantist as you pretend," she added provocatively. "Nor's Dick."

"I *don't* pretend to be an obscurantist," Dick replied, tugging manfully at the moustache that was beginning to hide a mouth alternately weak and stubborn. "I've never met the beast outside your radical rags. My God, the *Daily News*! I suppose that's the doctor's handiwork."

"It's my alert, intelligent spirit," Flavia laughed, as she bustled importantly among her bottles on the far side of a glass screen. "The world's *changing* . . ."

"Oh, we're to have a new heaven and a new earth," I said, "if your people are to be believed. I sometimes wish you'd *specify* a little. If you were dictator for a week . . . ?"

Flavia concentrated for some minutes on her measuring and pouring, while Dick sniffed like a cat turned loose for the first time in a strange room. I fancy he disliked to see her occupied in this way; but I doubt if it had yet occurred to him that, if some one else supported her, she would not have to support herself.

"If I were dictator?," she murmured, coming into the public part of the surgery and heating her sealing-wax

at the gas-jet. "I should try to give a decent chance to people of *our* age, first of all. In Victoria's time, when you had the youth and the health to do things, you never got the opportunity. Look at the poor king! He's almost an old man before he comes to the throne."

"But even a dictator could hardly have knocked his sainted mother on the head," Dick objected. "And, when all's said and done, her experience . . ."

"Of other times, other needs!," Flavia exclaimed. "It's that I want to upset: the tyranny of the *past* that drags each new generation along in the old rut. In your place, Dick, I should be going round the world now instead of changing the guard at Buckingham Palace. Just because *your* father and *his* . . . Whenever I see those scarlet tunics," she continued derisively, "those ridiculous bear-skins . . ."

"It's easy to *talk* . . .," began Dick.

"And it's easy to *act*," Flavia rejoined, "if you've the courage. Look at me! I've broken away from all traditions, I've learnt to do a man's job. Which makes me very happy: I've no *personal* grievance against life. I couldn't have done it, though," she continued, "if Uncle Roy hadn't lent me the money for my training; and, if I were dictator, I'd make it possible for *every one* . . ."

The challenge seemed to be intended for Dick; but, as I had myself shewn the courage that morning to tell my father that I did not want to take orders and that I doubted much of what he accepted without question, I had to say that "the tyranny of the past" had not pressed heavily on me.

"Your father had the money to let *you* choose," said Flavia.

"But, good Lord," Dick broke in, "if you're going

to redistribute the wealth of the world so that every one can wait, like Leslie, till he's found just what he wants . . . I mean to say, that's socialism ! My bootmaker might want to be an archbishop . . ."

The radicalism to which I had lately listened evidently had well-defined limits.

"And, if I were dictator, he'd have as good a chance as any one else," said Flavia. "I'd so revolutionize our system of education . . . But I'm no good at arguing ! I know what I *mean*, you may be surprised to hear, but I can't express it."

3

I am afraid that nobody who heard us talking that afternoon would be strongly tempted to accept Flavia's confident assurance that she knew what she meant, though it would be clear enough that she was unskilled in argument.

Perhaps I should say that she was unskilled in talking to more than one person at a time, for it seems to me beyond question that the books they had been reading together and the ideas they had discussed for the last five years left a mark first on Dick and then, through him, on a small group of like-minded men who subscribed to his silent leadership in the House of Commons. The "Wobblers", to give them the unflattering name bestowed by their exasperated Whips, voted almost as often with their radical enemies as with their conservative friends in the six years of fiery partisanship that ended with the war, refusing to condemn the reorganization of the army because it was carried out by a liberal lawyer or to reject a scheme of national insurance because it was offered by the detested hand of Mr. Lloyd-George. More than once in these years of strife I told Dick that he and

his friends constituted the nucleus of a centre party ; and more than once I felt that Flavia had inspired his independent attitude in the first place. They lacked, however, a spokesman of commanding gifts or presence and, when Dick himself was translated to a higher sphere, the group disintegrated.

This, however, is looking forward to the end of a movement that had not begun when Flavia talked that afternoon about "the tyranny of the past". At that time, still more in that place where controversy had slumbered since the first Reform Bill, her creed of equal opportunity sounded a good deal more revolutionary than it would now, only thirty years later, when we have grown used to adult suffrage and the presence of women in parliament, not to mention old-age pensions and the payment of members. I asked her, on our way to Rose Cottage, whether she had been trying to make Dick's flesh creep ; but she assured me that she had been talking for the good of both our souls and begged me not to disturb the seed she had been sowing.

"Do you imagine you'll get Dick to head a liberty-equality-fraternity movement in Marston?," I asked, as a line of school-children bobbed to us.

"I don't much care which side he's on," Flavia replied, "so long as he's *interested*. After all, aristocracy or democracy . . ." Her shrug intimated that there had been great geniuses in both camps. "You can have Lord Alster and his servants—*always* servants—and his villagers—*always* knowing their place—and there's this to be said for it : that you can't produce his type any other way. On the other hand, you can have them all starting from the same mark and finishing where they may. Jacky Winter, the blacksmith's son, becoming head of a college. There's a lot to be said for that too.

In the end it's some personal idiosyncrasy that decides you, like the thing that makes one man a catholic and another a protestant. Don't think I'm trying to *convert* Dick: I only want him to have something to think about. In the army . . ."

As she paused, I felt that I was not the only person to whom Dick had revealed himself as a square peg in a round hole.

"At present," I said, "Dick's like the big boy from the small school who finds he's the small boy at the big school."

"I suppose it's something that he's in the army at all," said Flavia.

Unless she meant that it was something for him to be still in the army after twelve months or so, I could not understand this.

"Seeing it was all arranged for him on the day he was born . . .," I began.

"I was thinking of his first shot," she interrupted. "In the Boer War . . . I'm afraid I shocked you, Leslie, by something I said then . . ."

"When you told me Dick's first impulse was always to run away from things?"

"You've not forgotten, then!"

"It seemed such an amazing thing to say. Within a very few hours, far from running away . . ."

"He was fighting like a madman. The courage of hysteria. However . . . I wish I felt he was enjoying life rather more . . ."

"When he's been put through his drill . . .," I suggested.

"It's more complicated than that," said Flavia.

"Drill . . . The idea of drill is to make people respond to an order automatically. If you stop to *think* . . .

Like playing the piano . . . Dick can't *help* thinking. The organization, the training, the type of man . . ."

"And when the whole business becomes second nature to him . . ."

"It never will," Flavia broke in. "He'll chuck it before that."

"Not while his father's alive," I said with equal assurance.

"I think you'll find he will."

"Then you'll never be able to charge him with running away again," I laughed. "There'll be the most *unholy* row."

"I hope not," Flavia returned easily. "With a little diplomacy . . ."

We had come to Rose Cottage, as we talked, and I turned into the garden for a moment to shake hands with the Wreydens while Flavia disappeared indoors to tidy herself for supper. It was a little, I thought, like passing suddenly from an arena to a mortuary. We had been so full, a moment before, of our young hopes and misgivings, the world lay all before us, we differed only in our plans for conquering it; here it seemed as though life was over and no one had come to bury the dead. Would Flavia ever break away unless she were removed by force? Had I, had any one, the power to apply it?

As I made some sort of conversation to a man who was burnt out and to a woman with nothing left to burn, it came upon me that I must rescue Flavia from all this. I was no longer a boy going back to school, no longer an undergraduate, but a grown man with a man's job and a signed contract to support it; and I had hardly seen her for twelve months. When she came out to the garden, I suggested that we should take a walk after supper; and in the high beech-woods above Marston I asked her

to marry me. We sat on a fallen tree looking down on the "Big House" and the village, my father's church and vicarage, Rose Cottage, the doctor's square stone pile, the one shop and post-office and the silver ribbon of water that symbolically shut it all off from the world. Flavia was so long silent that I thought she must be going to say "yes"—in a mood of sudden humility I could think of so many reasons for an immediate "no"!—; but, when I kissed her, she sighed and told me that we must keep our heads.

"My dear, you've only been taken on for a year," she reminded me.

"But I'm going to make it a permanent business," I declared.

"Until you do . . . No, don't kiss me again! It unsettles me. And we must be sensible. I'm much too fond of you to let either of us do something that would be a mistake. At present . . ."

Inevitably I thought of the scene in the garden of Rose Cottage before supper; and I asked if "at present" really meant "as long as my father and mother want me". To my surprise, Flavia answered that she hoped her sense of duty was adequate, but that it included a duty to herself.

"We have enough to do, shouldering responsibility for our own actions . . ." she added enigmatically.

"If my contract's renewed at the end of the year?," I persisted.

"Let's wait till then," she answered. "I once told you there was no 'of course' where I was concerned. Life's been such a pillar-to-post affair ever since I can remember. I hate to commit myself."

As she spoke, her eyes turned towards the "Big House"; and I felt a flame of jealousy running through me.

"You told me at the time that you could be nothing to me," I reminded her, "or to Dick either. Nothing but a friend. *That's* no longer true?"

"I'm not sure it was even true at the time," she answered with a smile that made her soft grey eyes shine like stars. "I've always loved you. If there were no one else to think of . . ."

With that I had to be content. I suppose it should have been enough: to know that I had no rivalry to fear either from Dick or from the Wreydens; but I believe I guessed even then that Flavia's conscience would be my worst enemy. I began this book to fill certain gaps in the official life of one friend, but I could as aptly have made it the study of another who in all her acts and impulses—shall I add, her mistakes and sufferings?—was guided by a sense of personal responsibility that nothing could shake. I might also, I suppose, write it as the history of a great passion that was born, if I am not greatly mistaken, in Roy Hadleigh's dispensary at the moment when Dick discovered on his own account that Flavia had to be rescued. This, however, would make me a protagonist when, for impartiality's sake, I would rather remain as long as possible a spectator.

I will therefore adhere to my original plan of presenting the man as I knew him within the narrow framework of the information which he himself chose to make public. The Honourable Richard Croyle, say the reference-books, sat as conservative member for north-east Dorsetshire from 1904 till 1912. I ask: "Why?" Captain Dutton tells us that old Benjamin Croyle was breaking up at the time and that no other member of the family was available. This would be a good enough explanation if, a year or two before his uncle began to fail, Flavia had not said that it would be a good thing for Dick to cultivate

an interest in politics since his days in the army were obviously numbered.

4

I have always assumed that the "diplomacy" at which she laughingly hinted and which enabled Dick to take up a different career without the "unholy row" which I predicted was Flavia's handiwork entirely.

She herself was the last person to admit that she ever influenced anybody, but in the early months of 1904 I noticed that Dick was quoting more and more freely from books which Roy Hadleigh had lent him (and I wondered whether Flavia had chosen them). I observed that my father's weekly letters echoed more and more gloomy vaticinations from Lord Alster on the coming election (and I wondered whether Hadleigh had inspired them). Finally, I detected more and more hints in Dick's conversation that he might be more profitably employed elsewhere (and I wondered whether his father was to be credited with the phrase, which I was soon to hear so often, that the army would have to be saved from outside and, if so, where he had learnt it). Then, suddenly, Dick telephoned to enquire if he might dine with me alone and ask my advice.

"They want me to stand in uncle Benjie's place," he informed me, without specifying who "they" were. "You know so much more about the political racket . . ."

"It will be an interesting experience," I said, "even if it doesn't lead to much. When you succeed, I mean, you'll be side-tracked in the Lords . . ."

"By that time there may be a job waiting for me abroad. Governor of a colony, perhaps. As things are, there really doesn't seem anything for me to do."

So far, I felt, Dick was only repeating a lesson taught

him by his father. It was not enough that a Croyle should spend his life as a regimental officer with little prospect of going on active service, not enough that he should make himself useful in one or other House of Parliament: if he could not annexe territory, now that the great acquisitive days of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were over, he must help to rule it.

"What are your own feelings?," I asked.

"I shall hate it like hell if I ever have to speak!," Dick answered unhesitatingly. "At the same time, I wouldn't trust Campbell-Bannerman and his gang a yard. I'm not thinking of what may happen to *us*, it's the *country* . . ."

If I still seemed to be listening to a recitation, it was an honest lesson, honestly taught and learnt. Lord Alster never whined about an injury to his personal position or influence, whether it was from the Harcourt death-duties ten years earlier or from the Asquith super-tax a few years later. The electoral and educational programme of the radicals might make Jack as good as his master and Jill as good as Jack; but, though it brought down the pride of the old governing class, it did not as yet directly threaten the imperial fabric for which so many generations of Croyles had lived and died. As a family, they were in many ways narrow and stupid, but their narrowness and stupidity were sublimely free from self-interest.

"Your father," I said, remembering my last conversations with Flavia, "must be pretty well worked up to let you think of chucking the army."

"It was *his* idea," Dick informed me. "You know *my* views on that subject. I've simply loathed this last year, but there was nothing I could do. And it would only have got worse the longer I'd remained. It'll sound

conceited, I expect, but I was seeing more and more *through* the whole business. We're on wrong lines. If we had another war to-morrow, it would be a repetition of South Africa."

"But I thought the trouble was that there wouldn't be another war and that every one knew it. I don't count frontier scraps and native risings."

Dick shook his head and began to arrange his knives and forks in an overlapping circle, each one seeming to nibble at the one in front.

"I thought the French might have turned nasty when we were busy in South Africa," he answered, "but the fact is, they were afraid of being attacked in the rear by Germany; and Germany was afraid of a row with Russia, while I daresay Russia wanted to keep both eyes on Japan. I never said there'd not be another war, it was one of your damned Oxford doctrinaires. I think it's only too probable, if once you break this circle so that every one isn't waiting to be stabbed in the back. And as I can't possibly do anything from inside . . ."

I wondered what could be done from outside by an ex-subaltern of the Guards who advertised beforehand that he was ready to vote, but that he must not be expected to speak.

"What's your plan of campaign?," I asked.

"Well, first of all," said Dick, "I should go for universal military training. Old Bob's idea . . ."

"Until you've had an overhaul," I pointed out, "you will only be providing so much additional cannon-fodder for the next generation of Bullers."

"But my men would never fight. It wouldn't be necessary. If we had the whole nation under arms . . ."

For the first time in many years my thoughts went back to a New Year's Eve party at Marston when Roy

Hadleigh was chaffing me about "the White Man's Burden" and I, in language very similar to Dick's, was maintaining that, if we had a big enough army, no one would dare attack us. I could hardly believe that I had converted the youthful Flavia with a phrase and that she, in the last few weeks, had converted Dick; but I believed even less that he had thought this out for himself.

"That's all very well for a small nation like the Swiss," I said. "*Nemo me impune lacessit*. Frankly, since the Boer war, I wouldn't trust a ministry or a man with your nation in arms. I wouldn't trust the nation-in-arms itself if it got stirred up over another Fashoda incident."

"Oh, if I thought my scheme would make wars more common . . .," Dick interrupted impatiently. "Don't think I'm a militarist, old man. I've been brought up too much on the idea of war, though you needn't tell my father I said so. Sometimes I've lain awake at night wondering what I should *do* . . . Of course we must *defend* ourselves and maintain our *prestige* and keep people in *order*," he went on in belated homage to the gods of Marston Abbas. "Civilization and all that . . . At the same time . . ."

It was in this fashion—over a dinner-table at the New Century Club, to which I had been elected on settling in London—that I learnt of the change Lord Alster had decreed in his eldest son's career. Maybe it is all there was to know. The venerable member for north-east Dorsetshire begins to break up at a time when the head of the family feels he must mobilize the last ounce of his influence to resist the political earthquake that every one is beginning to feel. Dick's account was confirmed by my father the next time I went to Marston; and Captain Dutton has given it lasting currency in the

official *Life*. I might add that the change in his career was welcome to Dick, as the atmosphere of the unreformed army at this time was intolerable to him ; but I should have found nothing more to add if he had not indulged in this queer outburst against "militarism".

To be sure, he had pulled himself up after the unfinished phrase about "lying awake at night"; but he soon broke out again, from the text of some book that he had been given, to discuss gloomily what he called "empire-building from the other side". We had, he supposed, no independent record of the wars that established the *pax Romana*? The slaughter of barbarian hordes by trained troops, yes; the enslavement of entire peoples, yes; but nothing, presumably, describing the helpless, dumb horror of these wild creatures as the scourge of Roman civilization fell on their quivering backs?

"What's set you on this trail?," I asked.

"I've been thinking about it for years," he answered. "When m'tutor used to gas about '*the grandeur that was Rome*' . . . I felt I could tell him a thing or two about that. Letters and journals, you know, that my jolly old ancestors wrote when they were establishing the *pax Britannica* in India. This is between ourselves, Leslie, of course, but I feel I've seen the empire business and the war business as they really are. Without the flags and the pipe-clay and the *Rule, Britannia*. The noise and the stink and the cruelty and general beastliness. That made me wonder about dear old Rome. You remember m'tutor. '*Civis Romanus sum.*' All very well. Roman cities, Roman roads, Roman law, Roman justice. You can't separate it, though, from the Roman triumph and Roman slavery. Amphitheatres where we have football-grounds. And those long lines of Roman crosses after anything

that we should call a strike or a demonstration. Poor devils squirming and screaming. They were proper swine, those Romans."

"You must judge them," I said, "by the standards of their time."

Dick sniffed and muttered something about "barbarians".

"I'm not judging anybody," he then said. "I can't afford to. Good God, what must the 'barbarians' of to-day think when a British gun-boat noses its way up their rivers? I always think of that picture in the museum at home; the shadows of a camel-corps advancing across the desert . . . You ought to read that book: *Methods of Barbarism: A Study of British Imperial Expansion* . . . However . . . I want to hear your views on this House of Commons business."

5

I confess I was sorely puzzled: Dick leaving the army, Dick entering parliament, Dick "saving the army from outside", above all, Dick holding forth like a professional orator of the Humanitarian League. When next I went to Marston, I asked Flavia if I was seeing the fruits of her "diplomacy"; but she assured me that she had not even heard from Dick since we called on her together several months earlier nor from Lord Alster for some time before that.

"And, anyway," she added, "you know I haven't the faintest influence with either of them."

I knew at least that she believed this. I knew that, when Dick poured out his heart to her, she imagined she was only listening sympathetically. It was a blind spot on Flavia's mental retina that she could never picture any one wishing to go through fire and water for her,

changing his faith at a word from her or subsequently—and disastrously—holding her responsible.

"I don't know how long it will take him to 'see through' the House of Commons, as he would call it," I said, "but I'm glad he's chucking the army."

We were sitting in the room where, as a child, I had inadvertently heard Roy Hadleigh talking to my father about the perils of "over-anxiety". Odd phrases from that conversation mingled with phrases that I had heard Flavia use about "obeying first and thinking afterwards". I heard an echo of Dick's late outbursts against war and the ends for which it was fought. Somewhere I had to fit in his new discovery that peace was best secured by vast military preparations and that he could preach his crusade most effectively by leaving the army. Somehow, if I was to advise Dick (as he was always begging), I must understand the transformation that had overtaken him since, as small boys, we reconquered India and relieved Lucknow and suppressed the Mutiny on wet afternoons in the museum at Marston and he taught me to distinguish between a major-general, a lieutenant-general and a general.

"D'you think the doctor has ever hinted that Dick's not cut out to be a soldier?" I asked.

Flavia looked up at a photograph of Dick in full-dress uniform. The aquiline nose and prominent chin made him look very stern and inflexible, every inch a guardsman of the breed that dies but does not surrender.

"I don't know that that would be very well received," she answered. "Lord Alster just wouldn't believe it."

"He would, if he'd heard Dick the other night," I told her. "Any one would."

"And any one who heard him when he's in his *other* mood . . .," Flavia began. "The difficulty is, my

dear, there are *two* Dicks, each equally convincing in the right surroundings. When he's down here, talking about his old grandfather, he means it all, he'd love to be part of a thin red line. When he's drilling his men, thinking he may have to lead them . . ."

"If he ever *did* think that," I put in.

At the beginning, Dick's complaint against the Guards was that they were a purely decorative body for ceremonial occasions. Lately his phrase "*If* we're ever landed in a big war" had become "*when* the system's put to the practical test of war." It seemed a queer moment for him to be throwing up his commission if he still aspired to end his days as a field-marshal.

"All the time feeling that the army's being run on wrong lines . . .," Flavia continued. "Which is the *real* Dick . . . Not that it matters: he's got himself out of it now, thank goodness."

"And you had no hand in it?"

"I'm far too much out of favour! Lord Alster is of opinion that Dick wastes too much time thinking about me. If he does, it's really not my fault: if they set up a sort of morbid craving by shutting me out and not giving him any one he can talk to in my place . . . It may be awkward if he's going to live much in his constituency."

I told Flavia that there would be no awkwardness if she would become engaged to me; but she replied that, after being a pauper all her life, she was not going to throw up a good job for something that was still a gamble.

"I've said again and again that I'm not going to marry him," she went on. "If that's not good enough for him and them and you . . ."

I made haste to say that it was all I could fairly expect at present. Flavia, for the first time in our long friend-

ship, was out of temper ; and I feel, in looking back, that I was seeing for the first time certain qualities that were to shape her life for the next ten years. She cherished a dangerous confidence in her power of being " friends and nothing more ", as she once expressed it ; she became reckless if she was slighted, doubly reckless when the slight was aimed through her father ; and she was deaf to advice and warning whenever in her heart she suspected that they were only too well justified. I now know, on her own admission, that she was uneasy about Dick ; but her growing doubt whether she could control him made her the more stubborn in trying and the less ready to be lectured by any one.

This, however, belongs to a later chapter ; and at the time of this meeting Dick had still to make his first appearance as the new conservative candidate for north-east Dorsetshire. I had hunted Flavia out of her dispensary and brought her to the vicarage in the hopes of hearing the real reason for his leaving the army. Did I know any more at the end than at the beginning ? I rather doubt it. Do I know any more now ? The question, in its simplest form, is whether Dick entered the House of Commons because he felt there was more useful work for him to do there or whether he " ran away " from the army when he began to suspect that it involved something more than decorative appearances on ceremonial occasions.

The wounds, the " mentions " and finally the D.S.O. in the Great War should convince any one that, once Dick was under fire, he did not stop even to ask himself whether he was an ideal part of an ideal military machine ; but he took his time to give up a sheltered position and I think Flavia would describe this as the process of running away and coming back. To her, indeed, the small

boy who funk'd at the nets and fell into disgrace at Winchester and went to stay with friends when his father was considering plans for getting him out to South Africa developed into the man who left the army in 1904 because he knew too much about the realities of modern warfare. And it was this I had in mind, nearly twenty years after the war was over, when I sat on a bench outside a west-of-Ireland fishing-inn and told Dick it was a man's strengths and weaknesses, his temptations, his lapses and his recoveries that made him a man of flesh and blood.

Now that he is dead, no one can hope to know the whole truth ; but the point I am trying to make, in filling the blank spaces of the official biography, is that despite his restless and faintly morbid imagination Dick did not, when he was brought to the scratch in 1914, turn and hide, whereas—all unknown to Captain Dutton—he did something very like this a decade earlier when he resigned his commission in order to sit as "*M.P. (Conservative) for north-east Dorsetshire . . .*" On this point at least Flavia and I should be in agreement ; and, as I have written of a warring dual personality, I suppose I was in agreement with her when she said : " The difficulty is that there are *two* Dicks . . . "

CHAPTER FIVE

“MARRIED, 1908, FELICITY . . .”

I

WHEN my free-lance days ended with a twelve-months' contract for "general utility", I gave up my bedroom at the New Century Club, said good-bye—except for a day or two at Christmas—to Marston and took a service-flat in Whitehall Court.

A small dining-room, a fair study and a good bedroom all overlooking the river were not, I thought, excessive for a bachelor and would only accommodate a married man when the spare bedroom was turned into a dressing-room, but I wished to begin modestly and to have some money put by against the day when I could tell Flavia that my agreement with the *Morning Standard* was being renewed for a term of years.

This laudable desire to save probably influenced my decision a few weeks later when Dick wrote to ask if I would accept him as a paying guest until he found more convenient quarters elsewhere. I was flattered by the request, for at Oxford he had gone into lodgings by himself and at Marston—ever since we were small boys together—I always suspected that he put up with my company because there was no other. At the same time, I felt apprehensive. Dick's companionable qualities developed late; and, though his tutor might say towards the end of his time at Eton that he was becoming more human, he continued to be stiffly reserved within sight and sound of his parents, awkward with women and

vaguely forbidding with men. I was far from confident that we should get on at such close quarters; but I reflected that, if he was still with me after his election, we should probably meet only at breakfast. Meanwhile, my rent would be halved.

"*Come when you like,*" I wrote, in the letter that was to turn me from a spectator into a participant of his drama, "*and stay as long as you can.*"

He arrived next day with a single gladstone-bag and a despatch-box half-filled with orders-to-view on which he invited my expert opinion as a householder of some two months' standing.

"My father," he explained in his slow, deep voice, "wants me to make him out an estimate so that he'll know how much to allow me. He's paying my election expenses, of course . . ."

Though it was no business of mine, I asked whether Lord Alster had not made a settlement on him when he came of age.

"We discussed it," Dick answered, "but there really didn't seem much point. I always had more than enough at Oxford and in the army. Isn't this the usual thing to do?"

"I don't know," I said. "My father came in for a little money three or four years ago and he made it over to me absolutely."

"So that he has no sort of control over you?," Dick asked in accents of surprise that told me clearly enough why he was being kept on an allowance.

"He feels," I answered, "that, if parents are to have any influence over their children, it mustn't be by the purse-strings. After all, if you're coming a cropper, you probably won't wait till you can do it on your own money."

"Well, I don't know. If I wanted to marry a barmaid, I could be brought up short pretty quickly. Unless I chose to raise money on my expectations."

"If you'd like that portion of my daily correspondence," I said, "which consists of money-lenders' offers—£5 to £50,000 on my note-of-hand alone— . . ."

"Of course," Dick added, following out his own thoughts, "I never *should* do a thing like that. At the same time . . . Well, you're very snug here. And you're sure I shan't be in the way for a few days? The worst of digging by oneself . . ."

I suggested that I should shew him around the flat. If he had finished his sentence, he would have said that London was a big place for a solitary man; and, if I had reminded him of all the relations and friends who would gladly have entertained him, he would have said—at least to himself—that the one person beside me that he ever wanted to see was now separated from him by some hundreds of miles. At this stage of our friendship, indeed, Dick would not readily discuss Flavia with anybody; and I doubt if he could have defined his attitude to her. For his last years at school and for the whole of his time at Oxford he had taken her for granted; and I do not believe that any tender feeling, still less any jealousy or passion, began to creep in until the day—at which Hadleigh once hinted—when one or other of his parents told him that he was making the girl conspicuous and himself a little absurd. Then, in his deliberate way, Dick had come to see that Flavia was being gently elbowed out of his life, but I do not know that he made any resistance. Meeting her a week or two before, he had begun—I suspect—to ask himself whether she could not be rescued somehow from her dispensing drudgery; but I doubt whether he thought of rescuing her himself. And I

believe that he only ceased to take her for granted this first evening in Whitehall Court when he came into my bedroom and caught sight of a signed photograph which caused him to explain :

"Hullo ! She's given you one of these too !"

There was a note of unmistakable resentment in his voice ; and I felt that for the first time in the history of our triple alliance he was wondering if three was not one too many.

"I've had that for a long time now," I said ; and then, because the proprietorial note in his voice nettled me, I added : "You don't mind, I hope ?"

"No business of mine ! She can give them to the prime minister or the village grocer, if she likes." Honour being satisfied in this puerile exchange, he continued his inspection of the flat. "If I can shove a writing-table under the window in the dining-room . . . I shall only want breakfast, you know . . . Yes, I think you're uncommon snug here."

This is perhaps the place to record that a writing-table was installed before the end of the week and, on it, a silver-framed photograph with the inscription "*For Dick with love from Flavia.*" I made no reference to it ; and I do not remember that her name was mentioned until the night, some weeks later, when he returned from Marston after the declaration of the poll.

"Flavia sent you her love," he told me with the air of an honourable man punctiliously discharging an unwelcome duty. Then, stiffening up to his full height and tugging at his now quite promising moustache, he asked if I was "serious" about her. "You were boasting the other day about your money being your own, absolutely . . ."

It seemed a little odd to hear the heir to Marston

Abbas charging me with boastfulness about a very modest salary and more modest patrimony, but the absurdity was drowned in irritation at his manner. If he had been Flavia's natural protector and I had been compromising her, his tone could hardly have been more hectoring.

"It'll be time enough to be serious—or solemn, if you prefer it—when I'm in a position to marry," I answered.

"I just wanted to know," said Dick, though he could not feel that I had told him much.

"May I return the compliment?," I asked. "Are *you* . . . ? If so, it's only fair to warn you . . . I mean, Flavia and I have talked pretty frankly . . ."

"I suppose you mean she can't get away from her father? "

I pondered for a moment the exquisite fitness of the phrase on which Dick had accidentally lighted; and I thought of Flavia when she was still a schoolgirl, standing with her back to me by the window of my study at the vicarage and recommending me—between clenched teeth—to remember "who and what" she was.

"She'll never be able to get away from her father," I said.

"He'll die some time," Dick argued.

"If he died to-morrow, it would be too late to give her a fair start. If he were cured, which is almost inconceivable . . ."

I was about to say that this also would be too late: Flavia's label, with all that knew the Marston setting, would then be "*the daughter of a reclaimed drunkard*" instead of "*the daughter of a man who drank himself to death*" and, even if she had wanted to marry Dick, the new formula would have been no better than the old as a recommendation to his parents.

"Have they ever *tried* to cure him, do you suppose?,"

he enquired, beginning to pace my small room with vast and heavy strides that set the china rocking and tinkling in my cabinets. "If it's a question of money . . ."

"It would be too late to help Flavia much," I told him again.

"We can do that in other ways. Get her *away* from it all occasionally. My God, ever since she was a child . . . Leslie, can't we put up a purse and make Hadleigh *order* her a holiday?"

"It would only be a waste of time," I said, looking beyond the immediate question.

"I don't call it a waste of time," Dick rejoined impatiently, "if we can give her something else to think about for a few weeks."

This seemed unanswerable; and, as he would have gone into the enterprise alone if I had refused to accompany him, I saw no purpose in warning him again that he was preparing a disappointment for himself.

2

That summer, when the House rose, Flavia came to spend a fortnight in London. Whether she believed that her frocks and hotel-bills were a present from "uncle Roy" I am unable to say. We hoped so; but I remember her whispering on the last night, as we went on to supper after a theatre: "I do wish Dick wouldn't spend so much money on me!" as though she felt that anything accepted from him was being taken on slightly false pretences.

Had she begun already to fear that the position had slipped out of her control? There was a change in Dick, which I can perhaps describe best by saying that the passive boy who had been pushed into the army and the passive youth who had been coaxed out of it was now a

man with a purpose in life and his own very definite ideas how to attain it. Recognizing that Jimmy Wreyden would be an unpalatable father-in-law for his parents to swallow and believing that Flavia would not leave him till he was dead or cured, he set himself to effect a cure, without ever considering—so far as I am aware—that there might be other and graver obstacles to the marriage.

From the end of 1904, when the campaign opened, to the beginning of 1906, when it closed in disaster, I was left to draw my own deductions from rare conversations with Roy Hadleigh or my father, spasmodic appeals from Flavia and the evidence of my household books. The member for north-east Dorsetshire found it necessary to spend more time in his constituency than is usual with the holders of safe seats, though he hurried back to London in the middle of a long-advertised tour, when Dr. Wreyden was persuaded to go into a home and Flavia came up to be at call. I cannot say for certain that Dick—through Hadleigh—paid the expenses of the treatment (which, alas!, was entirely fruitless), but it was at this time that a bland Hebrew called in Whitehall Court to see Mr. Croyle on private business. Remembering my unfortunate reference to money-lenders' circulars, I repeated my warning about "waste of time".

"I don't consider it's a waste of time," said Dick, "if I can get the fellow right."

It was "I" now, I observed, no longer "we"; and Dick's tone warned me that another whisper of unsolicited advice would cause him to march out of the flat. This I was pledged by Flavia to prevent. At the end of her holiday she wrote to say that she was very much worried—which I interpreted to mean that Dick had proposed to her—and that she depended on me to "make him see sense". I promised to do what I could; but, as always,

the Dick with whom Flavia had to contend was neither the Dick who shared my flat nor the Honorable Richard Croyle M.P. whose narrow face and long body were beginning to be recognized in the House of Commons. The besotted lover whom I was asked to "make sane" was an uncommunicative young member of parliament, apparently quite uninterested in women. For five days out of seven during these last years of the Balfour parliament Dick was in his place at question-time, a frock-coat draped about his lanky person and a tall-hat balanced on the bridge of his aquiline nose; he remained there or thereabouts till the welcome cry of "Who Goes Home?"; and on five nights out of seven he was placidly writing letters or reading some book sent me for review when I returned to the flat. I have never seen a man who seemed less likely to be tormented by an unrequited passion. I have also never lived under the same roof with one who gave me less opportunity of talking to him for his own good.

When I went to Marston in the summer of 1905 for a fortnight's holiday, Flavia walked up to the vicarage the first evening to ask how I had left Dick, as at their last meeting he was on the highroad to a breakdown.

"He's just as he's been for months," I told her.

"Uncle Roy's rather anxious."

"I should have thought that unnecessary, but does he suggest any remedy?"

Flavia sighed and rubbed her forehead with the back of one hand as though, by rubbing away the frown, she could rub away the thought that had caused it.

"I suppose, if I disappeared . . .," she began, in the tone of one saying: "*If I were dead* . . ."

"With Dick or from him?," I enquired.

"Uncle Roy would say 'with him'. He thinks I should

be Dick's salvation ; and, as the Alsters would never give us their blessing, an elopement is the only thing left. Whether he'd still think I should be Dick's salvation if he knew I didn't feel about him in that way . . ."

"Why not tell him and let him hand it on? Better still . . ."

"Marry you?" Flavia shook her head and sat wearily on her favourite footstool. "Leslie, if Dick read of our engagement to-morrow morning, one of us three would be dead before the night. I mean it seriously, though Heaven knows I don't say it with any pride. I never ought to have let him become so dependent on me. You remember what he was like, though? I hadn't the *heart* to turn him away. Or the head: I was only a small girl when he began to follow me about like a great unhappy dog. And now he's absolutely convinced that it's only a question of time . . .," she cried, suddenly springing to her feet. "If his people . . . or you . . . or uncle Roy . . ."

I felt tempted to ask why Flavia should imagine that any one could end a condition she would not end herself or why she drifted with open eyes into impossible positions because she blamed herself for having got into difficult positions. It was her fault that Dick had become "dependent" on her, so she allowed him to become helpless without her.

"In the long run," I said, "it would be kinder to Dick for you to drop right out. If he thinks it's only that you can't leave your father . . ."

I found myself unable to go on. I had seen Jimmy Wreyden in church that morning ; and, though his hands were perceptibly more tremulous, his eyes more blood-shot, there seemed no reason why he should not live another ten years. By then Mrs. Wreyden, who seemed

more vague and listless every time we met, would probably be a confirmed invalid. Flavia might talk of the duty that she owed herself ; but would she remember it when she discovered that others had become dependent on her ? A fury of mingled desire and despair robbed me of speech. She had never been more lovely than at this moment when she stood, slender and grave, in a close-fitting grey dress with her glowing hair and white skin thrown into relief by the square green panels of my little Queen Anne room. She might be lovelier still in ten years' time ; but why should our youth be wasted and to what end were we wasting it ?

“ Perhaps, when Dick sees that we *can't* be more than friends . . .,” she murmured without conviction.

“ He'll look about for some one else ? Not while you're within reach,” I answered.

From childhood Dick was socially shy of women, from boyhood he was sexually shy. He would have run away from Flavia as from the rest if she had not been under my wing, when they met, and too young for any one to remember whether she was a boy or a girl. Their intimacy—in a way—came too easily : he was never required to make another effort with a woman, he never looked beyond Flavia and at this time, I feel confident, he could not imagine that she would not always be at call. Shyness increased with his increasing freedom from all obligations to overcome it ; and, at a season when other men of his age found relief in casual amours, his natural instincts were repressed and endued with an unnatural urgency. For all the years that we lived together he was tormented in equal measure by his desires and his inhibitions ; and this it was that made me despair when Flavia talked about the need of “ remaining friends ” now that she had taught him to “ depend ” on her.

"I don't know what to do!," she sighed, when the time arrived for me to take her back to Rose Cottage. "Apart from everything else, if he would only understand that a big match is *expected* of him . . ."

"The things that are always 'expected' of poor Dick!," I exclaimed.

"Well, if things are to go on here as they've always done," Flavia replied, "he'll have to look about for an heiress."

3

This rather enigmatic hint, revealing how far I had lost touch with village politics since I went to live in London, was the first allusion I ever heard made to a subject that received pride of place in all my father's letters for the next year or two.

Its importance to my narrative is slight. Though in fact Dick married an heiress, he was not trying to save Marston at her expense; and I hold to my conviction that he married Felicity Tann through uttermost indifference. That he chose her rather than any one else may have been due in some measure to the expectations of his parents; that he chose anybody but Flavia was due to her persistent refusal of his hand. Is there anything more to say of the ruin with which Marston for a year or two was threatened?

I think not. In youth Lord Alster had followed the standard of living set by his mess; and throughout his career he had been requisitioning men and material that some one else had to supply. Bill-paying was for politicians. In private life, consequently, he followed the standard set by his father in a more prosperous era and requisitioned money from his agent, who was under orders not to bother him with financial jargon that he did not pretend to understand. Buying and selling, borrowing

and repaying were for attorneys and brokers. At no time was there any dramatic rake's-progress to record; but at no time was there a proper distinction between capital and income. Without cutting down a tree or mortgaging an acre, the Alsters maintained their ancient state; but no provision was made for the future and, when the dreaded word “supertax” was first heard in north-east Dorsetshire, they—like a thousand others of their kind—imagined themselves to be faced with destitution. The talk about a “rich wife for Dick” was not wholly jocular.

It was wholly ineffectual, however, as a means of helping Flavia or hindering Dick. By the autumn of 1905 the conservative government was crumbling beyond repair; and Dick's election-agent wrote to say that the liberals were running a strong local candidate. The sitting member thereupon engaged in an intensive canvass, making the round of his constituency in a dog-cart and putting up in the market-town where the last meeting of the day had been held. He always found plausible reasons for avoiding the “Big House”; but neither meeting nor canvass was allowed to get in his way when he came within range of Flavia and any one who talked of suitable heiresses at this season might as profitably have talked to the dead.

The man of one idea had become the man of a single obsession; and I found it no longer possible to disregard the warnings of those who declared he was heading for a breakdown. When Doctor Wreyden came to London for his treatment in the middle of the election campaign, Dick returned “on urgent private business” and followed Flavia like a shadow until she waylaid me—at midnight, as I left the *Morning Standard* office!—to say that she believed he was really off his head and that she would be off her head too unless “somebody” did “something”.

"The trap's closing," she announced sombrely. "I've sheltered behind father; and Dick just says he's quite willing to wait. His people? Oh, it's none of their business! Me? If I wasn't in love with him, I should never have put up with him for so long. He can't see that I've given him more and more of myself *only* because I'd given so much already . . ."

In those days there was a coffee-stall to the west of Saint Clement Danes Church; and I led Flavia to it. I do not suppose we either of us wanted to drink sweet, strong tea at that hour of the night, but I had to give her a chance of steadying herself. To this day I can never pass the Gladstone monument in the Strand without seeing in imagination a line of driverless four-wheelers, a cluster of muffled figures before the steaming, brilliantly lighted stall and, over against the railings of the church, an incongruous couple munching slabs of bread-and-butter as they argue in passionate whispers.

"At the New Year," I said, "I'm to be taken on as a permanency, with an increase of salary."

"And that would be the *last* straw! My dear, I'm *frightened* about Dick . . ."

"But you won't see that you're only making him worse. *No one* can live at fever-heat day and night . . ."

As I paused, she invited me to go on.

"I'm a doctor's daughter," she reminded me. "And I expect uncle Roy's said all that you're thinking."

"I suppose he still believes it would be the salvation of Dick for you to elope with him?" I enquired ironically. "Even though you're not in love with him?"

"Not now. But he also sees we've gone too far for me to drop him like a hot coal. Perhaps if I went away with him . . ."

I finished my tea and carried the cups back to the stall before I could trust myself to speak.

"Does Hadleigh recommend that?," I then asked.

"If I could cure Dick!," Flavia exclaimed in distraction.

"I and I alone am responsible for all this mess . . . If I could make him happy for a *week* . . ."

From the Law Courts behind us, one o'clock boomed and echoed.

"This is a thing I can hardly be expected to discuss," I said.

"No, you've never understood him or me!," she retorted. "The trouble *is* . . . If he were more in love than ever at the end . . . There'd have to *be* an end . . . Otherwise it would be the same as being married, without the blessing of society. And it's you I want to marry."

"Then there's not much danger . . .?," I began.

In the flickering light of a street-lamp I could see that the word "danger" had brought a wistful smile into her eyes.

"I don't believe Dick would entertain it for a moment," she answered, "so there's not much use in talking about it. If he *would* . . . If we could part friends afterwards . . . Or go on being *only* friends . . ."

"You think Dick would consent to go away with you when he *knows*, when you've told him again and again . . .?," I asked.

"He *wouldn't* know. I should make him forget I'd ever said that. If only I could be sure that the last stage wouldn't be worse than the first!"

Though I thought at the time that I was unlikely ever to forget this singular conversation, I find that I have

entirely forgotten how it ended. I remember long hours of tramping through wintry, deserted streets ; I think I remember a second stop at a second coffee-stall. At some point Flavia's voice abruptly failed her ; and we were conversing by means of rhetorical questions on the one side and nods or headshakes on the other, when we arrived—more by luck than conscious endeavour—at the door of her hotel.

And thereafter followed a protracted silence, which I made no attempt to break. In part, I knew that an ill-judged word would end everything between us ; and it was hard to remain self-controlled when I considered that Flavia was deliberately sinking deeper into confusion. In part, too, I could not trust myself in argument about the wisdom of becoming a man's mistress if one did not care enough for him to become his wife. And, even if I had dared to get in touch with her again, my work would have made it impossible. At the end of 1905 the government resigned ; a liberal ministry was formed under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman ; and I was sent as a "special election correspondent" to report on the state of opinion in the midlands. Between the last day of my tour and the first of polling, I did indeed get down to Marston for a couple of nights ; but, on calling at Rose Cottage, I was told that Flavia was staying with friends in London and, when I dined at the "Big House" on Christmas Day, Lady Alster informed me that Dick was speaking in the constituency of a hard-pressed friend somewhere in the north.

"I could have wished," her husband added, "that he'd waited till his own election was over. I *presume* it's quite safe, but one never knows . . ."

I said nothing for several minutes. The note which Dick had left for me as I passed through London contained

no mention of a northern tour. His letters, indeed, were to be sent to him at his own committee-rooms in Dorsetshire. Did this, could this, mean the elopement at which Flavia had once hinted? The Alsters, who seemed equally puzzled, were waiting for a comment of some kind; but I could only say rather fatuously that Dick had nursed his constituency for so many assiduous months that it must be regarded as safe.

The moment I could get away, I called on Roy Hadleigh in such terror as I had never known before and such misery as I have only once known since.

"Look here, about Dick and Flavia . . .," I began.

"I was rather counting on *you* . . .," the doctor interrupted.

"To clear up a mess that's too much for every one else?," I asked with more bitterness than courtesy. Good friend though Hadleigh had always been to me, I owed him a grudge for his advice or lack of advice to Flavia; and I could not forgive him easily for being as helpless now as the rest of us. "Dick never opens his mouth to me about anything these times . . ."

The doctor whistled pensively between his teeth for a moment or two and then observed that I had better come in. For the first time I realized that I had brought him out of his bed at midnight. I attempted some kind of apology, but he waved it away and told me with a sigh that, if he could say where "they" were, he most cheerfully would.

"You're convinced she's with him?," I asked.

"Dear lad, I've no idea," he answered, shuffling ahead of me to his surgery in an old dressing-gown and felt slippers. "It seems probable, doesn't it? They must thresh this out some time. Fully. Calmly. With no one to distract them. One can't remake the past; but, if

my lord Panjandrum had let them go on being friends, they mightn't have wanted to be more."

"Flavia *doesn't*," I said.

Hadleigh raised his eyebrows and slowly filled a pipe.

"Doesn't she?," he asked. "She doesn't want to *marry* Dick, but she wants to keep straight with her own peculiar brand of conscience. Whatever he is, you may say, she's made him," he continued between volcanic puffs. "You and I remember what he was like *before* . . . Well, if she imagines he'll drop to pieces when she's not there to hold him together . . . You and Dick *both* confuse loving with being in love. No, I can't tell you where they are or what they're doing, but if *you* hear anything . . ."

I believe I promised that I would let him know ; but, when the time came, I broke my promise or persuaded myself that I had not heard anything definite enough to hand on. When I returned to Fleet Street, our "special election correspondent" for Lancashire and Yorkshire let fall that he had seen my friend Croyle at dinner in some hotel. I asked how he was looking. My colleague replied that he seemed all right, but that he had not spoken as Croyle was entertaining a woman.

When at last I wrote to Hadleigh, the election was over, Dick had scraped in by a few hundred votes and no doubt the whole of Marston had seen him when his supporters collected to cheer the result of the poll. I was indeed writing in the hope of receiving news, for I had none to give. He had not been near Whitehall Court ; and the one note which he sent me the day before parliament opened only contained a request for his letters to be forwarded to the Unionist Club in Old Palace Yard.

"*It's only for a time*," he explained, "*but this place has been set up to give cheap bed-and-breakfast to impecunious*

M.P.'s and now there are so precious few of us that it's in danger of going bankrupt. The bachelor members are being whipped up to keep things going ; and, as we shall have to work double shifts if we're going to hold our own against this fantastic liberal majority, there's a convenience in being near at hand. If I may, I'll leave my books and furniture with you till I'm told I've done my duty."

A cheque for his share of the Christmas quarter's rent accompanied the letter ; and I was too much dumb-founded even to tear it in two. This, I said, was the man who had once hectored me to know if I was " serious " about Flavia. He had sneaked away with her and sneaked back ; he was afraid to meet me ; but he did not mind asking me to warehouse his furniture until he was ready to move it.

" And, as he's paying for rooms he doesn't use," I whispered in savage irony, " it would be absurd for *me* to bother. It's not *my* business. Not in the least ! Oh, no ! "

Very deliberately, though I bit through the stem of my pipe and broke a looking-glass in hurling it away, I went to the chest of tools which my mother had given me when I set up house. Taking a mallet, I very deliberately studied Dick's possessions. He had brought his own bed, specially constructed for his abnormally long body, his own writing-table, a revolving book-case and an abomination known as a " smoker's cabinet ". If I had retained any humour in my gorilla mood of destruction, I should have smashed this cabinet first ; if common sense had been included in the qualities that inspired my methodical preparations, I might have wondered how I should explain or dispose of the wreckage. Instead, I thought only of breaking, burning, eliminating Dick from these rooms and from my life and then throwing his cheque back in his

face. "This . . . this . . . this will startle your weak intellect," I gasped ; and, with one of the inexplicable digressions which the human brain makes in its most excited moments, I paused to wonder why Dick would be so much startled. The reason was given in the ironical phrase which I had used a moment since : it was not, he would say, any business of mine.

I restored the mallet to its chest and dropped limply into a chair. Dick's letter was on the floor ; and I read it again. It was not the heart-cry of a man who had lately passed through any emotional crisis. Did this mean that Flavia had convinced him at last ? Or did it mean that he had convinced her ? Should I hear that they were engaged, married ? Was he keeping away till she had found an opportunity of breaking the news gently ? I could not and would not believe that she was marrying him ; and yet anything seemed possible with a girl who could tell me coolly that she would become his mistress without another thought if this would cure him. Had she ? Was he cured ? Were they living together at this moment, with the Unionist Club as an accommodation-address for his letters ?

I suppose I might have found out something if I had written to Flavia ; but I should hear soon enough, I told myself, if she was married or engaged. I should find out soon enough, too, if she was living with Dick ; and, if I did not write, it was because I could not bear to know. For days or weeks, whenever I heard a letter dropping into the wire cage in the hall, I shut my ears and eyes, wondering if I could yet bear to be told more than that she and Dick had tried to "thresh things out" ; and, if this was cowardice, I have now paid for it, full measure. To be sure, I am no longer puzzled that a thing incredibly big to me should have been discussed by Flavia as though

it were incredibly small to her ; I may have learnt the difference between loving and being in love ; but at five-and-twenty I could not share Flavia, even in thought, even with a man to whom she was indifferent.

So I skulked like a wounded animal, avoiding my friends, scamping my work, not writing, almost afraid to read the letters that were sent me, until the night when I sprang up at the sound of a latch-key grating in my front door and heard Dick's deep voice saying that he wanted to ask my advice.

5

I had come back from the office, after spinning my work out to the latest possible moment, and was looking at a pile of new books as an excuse for not going to bed. I had any one of a dozen valiant speeches carefully rehearsed for this meeting ; but all I said was : “Hullo ! You're late” ; and, when I got into a rehearsed attitude, waiting for him to offer what explanation he could, I only found myself puzzling to discover where I had seen that scornful expression and deflated bearing before. Was it when Dick visited me at the vicarage with congratulations on my Eton scholarship and something that I can only call a contemptuous footnote on his late ordeal at Winchester ? I heard myself putting him superfluously at his ease and offering him a drink.

“What d'you want me to advise you about ?,” I asked.

He tossed me a crumpled cutting from a now defunct organ of blackmailing scurrility and asked if I thought it would do any good for him to thrash the editor. I saw something about a “*bachelor M.P.*”, something more about “*the heir to a peerage*”, but I was given no time to read the article through.

"Is this intended for you?," I asked, as he looked over the top of his tumbler and repeated his question about "a thundering good hiding".

"It's being circulated in my constituency," Dick answered.

"Where the king can do no wrong. I should ignore it."

"My father's got hold of a copy. I shouldn't mind for myself, but I happened to meet Flavia when I was in the north . . ."

The pulses in my head began to hammer so that I could not hear the end of his sentence; and I threw the paper on my writing-table, thrusting my hands into my pockets so that he should not see that they were trembling.

"Does it mention her name?," I asked, bending to hide my face. "It *will*, if you bring an action for libel. I should leave the thing alone. As for personal violence . . . Not to be thought of."

A long pause followed; and Dick sauntered about my study, fingering the new books on my table. Once or twice he began indignant sentences which he did not finish; and at length, coming to anchor by the window, he stood looking moodily down on the trams that swung and screeched along the Embankment until I murmured that it was time for me to turn in. Then, as though he felt that an apology was expected of him, he described all over again the predicament of the Unionist Club and asked whether, his utmost duty now done, I should care to have him back.

"Is it really worth your while?," I asked, reaching for the book that contained our joint accounts. "For the last half-year you were hardly here at all. If this club suits you better . . ."

"I only went there because I couldn't well refuse," Dick answered. "Last year? Well, we were all getting

ready for the election. Of course, if you've made other plans? I always felt I was rather like the mother-in-law in the song: '*She came for a week on New Year's Day and stopped till the end of the year.*'"

Whatever had happened in the last six months, I saw that Dick was locking a door as, once before, he had locked a door when he dismissed the Winchester episode with the words: "By the way, my people don't want this talked about."

"I nearly telephoned to you to-day," I said in an effort to gain time.

Dick had come away from his window and was sitting on the "smoker's cabinet" which I had so nearly demolished with a mallet. I did not want him, but I could not tell him why I did not want him.

"Anything up?," he enquired.

"Nothing important. I had to go to a ridiculous luncheon-party; and an American girl asked if I could get her a ticket for the Ladies' Gallery. What she'd really like, I feel sure, is tea on the Terrace. If you'd care to give her that . . ."

"There's nothing I should loathe more," Dick informed me candidly, "but I'll do it to oblige you. What's her name?"

"Miss Felicity Tann. Her father's by way of being a multi-millionaire," I answered, congratulating myself on having shelved the question of having him back. "She's quite a nice girl, but this is her first visit to Europe and she's rather intense."

Dick made a note of the name and resumed his examination of my books. I said that, if he would excuse me, I really must go to bed now; but, as he clearly had something to confide, I left the light in my room burning. After half-an-hour or so, which I imagine he devoted to

mustering what Flavia once called the "courage of hysteria", he drifted in with his hat and coat on to say that I might expect him back next day, if that suited me. Seeing the photograph on my table, he observed:

"By the way, you were right and I was wrong."

There was no need for me to ask in what context; and, hearing his casual tone, guessing how often he must have practised this sentence before he could make it casual, I forgot my own misery, my bitterness against him and Flavia, I wanted only to break through his reserve and drive the awful look of dumb helplessness from his eyes.

"I'm sorry, for your sake, Dick," I said. "Frankly, I never thought she *would* . . ."

"And you told me so. Wasting my time, you called it. I should have done better to believe you. Unfortunately, I just couldn't. I thought we could *cure* poor old Jimmy. I thought, if *I* didn't mind waiting, *she* wouldn't. God knows what I didn't think! I thought that when two people were what *we* were to each other . . ." Wrenching himself away from the photograph, he began to stride up and down my bedroom, a wrathful and towering figure dogged by a gigantic shadow that mimicked and mocked his agonized gesticulations on the wall behind him. "I don't understand Flavia. She *says* she's so fond of me. It's been hell for her too. Yet the one thing I *want* her to do . . . And *this* time . . . Well, I'd actually arranged about the licence. . . . At the end, though . . ."

Suspecting all that I did, I could not suggest that Flavia at the end, as at the beginning and throughout their time together, had never been in love with him.

"Is she thinking of *your* father?," I asked. "He'd have opposed it, you know, tooth and nail."

“But he couldn’t have stopped it. Now, as things are . . .”

He turned abruptly to the door, but I begged him to tell me what the present position was.

“I really don’t know,” Dick answered. “My father guesses there’s *something* pretty serious up and he’s treated me to the finest dressing-down of my life. You may say I was a fool to give him the chance, especially as I’ve kept out of his way for so long. The fact is, I was in a hole. I’ve been getting into debt, what with one thing and another, and, if he’s to get me out, I must be on my best behaviour. So ‘the present position’ . . . No, I don’t *know*. And I don’t *care*! I don’t care about anything. Life’s just one big bloody mess!”

It was about four months after this, on the eve of the autumn session, that I read of Dick’s engagement to “*Felicity, daughter of Ogden B. Tann of New York*”.

CHAPTER SIX

“ONE SON, ONE DAUGHTER . . .”

I

I SUPPOSE it is below the dignity of an official biographer to comment on the time that elapses between his subject's betrothal and marriage, even if he be aware of it ; and, if Dick, who became engaged to Felicity in the late summer of 1906, did not marry her until the spring of 1908, half-a-dozen good reasons could be adduced.

There was, first of all, his illness in the winter of 1907 ; there was his quarrel with the party organization, when for half of one session the whips were not sent him ; there was Felicity's absence in America and Mr. Tann's delay in coming over to make the acquaintance of his prospective son-in-law's family. All of these I advanced from time to time when I was asked—as Dick's closest friend—when the marriage would take place ; and I could have given many more without venturing on the monstrous supposition that the engagement was ever so much as hanging fire.

Then and now, all the probabilities are against an explanation of this kind. Those who were present at Dick's tea-party on the Terrace would say, according to the charity of their dispositions, either that Felicity fell in love with him at first sight—and this is what the sentimental Margaret Croyle, eager for a marriage in the family, did in fact say—or at least that she was determined to have him at any cost, which was Philip Croyle's verdict ; they would say, as the ever-needy John Croyle said, that

Dick, at the lowest estimate, was doing well for himself financially ; and, if others had overheard him snarling to me that he did not care about anything now, they might—with me—have observed hopefully that he would not care to excess if a domineering strain occasionally revealed itself in the refined manner of his exquisite future wife. At first, I confess, it had alarmed me.

That the brown-eyed and black-haired Felicity was exquisite no one would deny. Small and—in appearance—brittle as china, with tiny feet and hands, tiny features and an upright little body that looked as though it would snap in two whenever she bent, she was faultlessly dressed, impeccably educated and flawlessly equipped with the taste and tastes, the sentiment and outlook, the moral standards and religious convictions of the best, or at least the most expensive, people in two continents. Paris had adorned her, without and within, before she came to London ; but, before she went to Paris she had become “exquisite” by the rigid canons of the most standardized country in the world. “*Miss Tann is perhaps best described . . .*” It was the word that all the fashionable papers of her native land had been taught to use of her ; it was the quality that she presented, like a passport, at every introduction.

“A figure in the best-period porcelain,” the inevitable “lady of title” who was chaperoning her whispered to me at our first meeting ; and I felt disposed to agree. If I had not seen Felicity on an exceptional occasion of mental distress that only proves the rule, I could no more picture her in physical or spiritual disarray, flushed with excitement or transfigured with moral indignation, than I can picture her smoking a cigar at a royal garden-party or sucking oranges in the pit of a theatre. To Dick I had called her “intense”, but this was a part of her

exquisite sensibility ; and my imagination painted her as calm in a beleaguered city, self-possessed as the tumbrils rattled under her windows and cool if Don Juan himself had climbed her balcony. In truth, there was nothing—I thought—below the porcelain exterior to become excited or hot or abandoned.

The domineering strain, of which I became conscious when she ordered me—on five minutes' acquaintance—to secure her a ticket for the Ladies' Gallery, seemed natural enough in a young New Yorker, sole daughter of a fabulously rich father and a " belle " who had been courted and flattered by the fortune-hunters of France and Italy for a couple of years before she came to England. When I read of the engagement, I told myself indeed that Felicity, like other American brides for English husbands, must give up expecting men to treat her as a goddess if she hoped for a happy married life in the less idealizing atmosphere of the Old World ; but I felt that, when she was introduced to Marston Abbas, she would perhaps cease to think she was conferring a favour on the Alsters by marrying their son. To do her justice, she put forward very few demands in the early days—how could she, when, to speak frankly, she had in effect proposed to Dick?—and her self-assertion appeared later, to secure the attention which she considered her obvious due.

Dick's attitude to the engagement, which I can describe at first-hand, was not calculated to give any woman an exaggerated opinion of her charms.

" I shall have to marry some time," he told me when we first met after the announcement. " Thanks, yes, my people are quite pleased. . . . Felicity said all the right things about the house, even to the point of asking if she might get out a photographer from Dorchester. Oh, her visit was a great success. . . . Well, you introduced me

to her, Leslie ! You can see . . . I mean, she has *intelligence*, as well as *looks*."

I was still so much surprised to find Dick marrying at all that I was equally prepared for ecstasy or dumb resignation and I could only ask mechanically when everything had been arranged.

"Last week ? The week before ? I've forgotten," he answered, standing up to fetch himself a cigarette. We were lunching at the flat ; and Flavia's photograph occupied its accustomed place on his writing-table. "She invited herself down after that party on the Terrace . . . Truth to tell, I wasn't over-keen to have her. For reasons of my own I've been avoiding the place, but I felt rather sorry for her. She said she had to be quite brazen about asking herself, because any number of people cold-shouldered her . . ."

"For fear of having it thought they were after her money ?," I asked.

"Yes ! And what with them and the men who were quite openly fortune-hunting . . . I said her position was rather like that of a reigning queen . . ."

"You mean that *she* would have to do the proposing when she found a man she liked ?"

This somewhat surprising observation was hardly capable of another interpretation ; but I could not believe without corroboration that he had left Felicity the initiative and that she had taken it.

"We had to wait for Ogden Tann's permission," Dick continued. "That hung us up for some days . . ."

I wondered whether, in his turn, Mr. Ogden Tann had waited for the Dorchester photographer. Marston Abbas, if one did justice to it, would fill two or three numbers of *Country Life* ; and I felt, from my still slight knowledge of Felicity, that she would do justice to

it. In imagination I could already see a full-page representation of "the west front", "the long gallery", "the Italian garden" in the society papers of New York; and I could see one section of New York society poring over a group with the legend "*House-party at Marston Abbas, the Dorsetshire seat of Viscount Alster, whose eldest son, the Honourable Richard Croyle . . .*" Dick and Felicity, I presumed, would be in the middle, flanked by his parents, while—"reading from left to right"—Philip and John would be towering at the back and Margaret would be seated on a cushion in front. The other guests would be packed round this family core; and a third of the names would be given wrong. The Croyles, however, male and female, would be recognizable by their height, their raw boniness and their formidable square-bridged noses.

"When are you going to be married?" I asked.

Dick stared blankly out over the river, as though he had not heard me or, perhaps, as though he had not until now grasped that an engagement normally led to marriage.

"Felicity's going home for Christmas," he then answered. "After that . . . Well, as soon as her people can get over . . . I should think it would be in the early spring, unless anything unforeseen crops up."

It would have sounded ridiculous if I had asked whether he meant the spring of the following year; and yet, as the official records set out beyond cavil, it was not until the spring of 1908 that the marriage took place. The explanation is that something unforeseen did in fact crop up. Within a few weeks of this conversation, my father wrote to say that Jimmy Wreyden was laid up with a feverish cold; within another week he was dead.

2

Naturally, I went home for the funeral, though I too had been avoiding Marston since the time—eight or nine months earlier—when I arrived there to find that Dick and Flavia had both mysteriously vanished. Had I wanted to go—and her final words at our last meeting were that I must not talk to her about marrying till she gave me leave—, it would have been difficult, for the *Morning Standard* was curtailing its parliamentary reports in favour of a descriptive article which I had been employed to write. In fact, though, I needed time to recover from the shock of finding her gone.

When I arrived, my parents met me with the announcement that she had once again disappeared. For a crazy moment I told myself that she had run off with Dick ; but my father, who did not indeed seem to think this altogether crazy, informed me that Dick was at the “ Big House ” and that Lord Alster wished to see me at once. In the long-drawn nightmare that followed, it seemed that every one in Marston wanted to see me at once : Mrs. Wreyden and Lady Alster, Hadleigh and the younger Croyle boys, Lord Alster and Margaret. I was handed on in whispered colloquy from one black-habited mourner to another ; it was conveyed to me that I—and I alone—could prevent an indescribable scandal ; and I heard myself repeating with the impatience of desperation that I was Dick’s landlord and not his keeper.

No one ever defined what the trouble was ; but I guessed all I needed when the doctor led me away from the grave-side and, for once speaking with the majority, observed :

“ It’s a pity this couldn’t have happened six months later. Dick would have been safely married by then.

However, it's never any good talking about 'might-have-beens'. What you have to do, my young friend, is to take the fellow back to London and keep him there. He's not to see Flavia. And this Tann girl's not to know that such a person as Flavia exists."

I should have guessed, in any event, an hour later, when Dick stared dizzily across the railway-carriage and, seeming to recognize me for the first time, cried that I must help him find "her". I said that, if he was referring to Flavia, I did not know where she was. He called me a liar, apologized, declared vaguely that any way I could find out and, with a complete loss of control, warned me shrilly that, between us, we should send him clean off his head.

To this day I cannot travel the last fifty miles of the journey into London without hearing a ghostly echo of "You *must* . . . D'you hear, Leslie? . . . Well? . . . Come along now! I say, you *must*!"

"And if I could?," I asked him at the end, as I got into a hansom and left him to join me or not as he pleased. "Hadleigh only said that she'd gone away for a few days' change . . ."

"I could find out where her letters are being forwarded," Dick muttered with an air of idiot cunning. "Half-a-crown to the postmistress. She was still-room maid at one time . . ."

"And if you did?," I persisted. "I tell you frankly I'm not going to let Flavia be worried unnecessarily. Even if you weren't engaged to some one else . . ."

"Thank God, it's not too late to stop that!," Dick broke in. "It's better that Felicity should find me out now . . ."

Then, turning his back on the cab, he melted into the crowd that was pouring out of the station. For two days

and two nights he was lost to view ; and I could only picture him madly scouring a city of six million souls for a girl who might be in Exeter or Norwich. No one else seemed to have any better idea of his whereabouts, though I received communications from his parents by every post. The daily letters, accumulating on his table, came to be interspersed with telegrams ; and a few minutes before his return, which was as unheralded as his departure, Felicity herself telephoned to ask for his address. I could only say that he had been called away suddenly ; and, as I hung up the receiver, Dick staggered in, shewing his teeth like a wild animal and muttering that “ they ” were “ hiding her damned well ”.

I doubt if, either before or since, I have seen a man who looked to be nearer the border-line of insanity. His hair was disordered, his eyes bloodshot, his cheeks unshaven ; and I should say he had not tasted food nor lain down since he gave me the slip eight-and-forty hours earlier.

“ I don’t know who ‘ they ’ are,” I said, “ but any one who’s helping to keep Flavia away from you is doing the only possible kindness to all of you. Man alive, don’t you see that, if she *wanted* to meet you, she *would* ? Meanwhile, what am I to tell Felicity if she asks me again where you are ? ”

Dick poured himself a whiskey-and-soda and reached for his hat.

“ You can say you don’t know,” he answered. “ It’ll be quite true.”

“ She didn’t sound particularly cheerful. You must admit it’s rather hard to understand . . . ”

“ Oh, tell her the whole damned story !,” he shouted. “ Then she can break it off. And good riddance. Of *me*, I mean.”

As he groped for the door I pointed to the letters and

telegrams piled high on his writing-table. From their number I guessed that half were still congratulations. Felicity, no doubt, was receiving her share of cables, but the bulk of her letters would arrive lumpily with each successive American mail. They would still be dribbling in when the New York papers, which by now had probably made free use of the Marston photographs, announced that the engagement had been broken off. Then, unless she retired from the public view, she would for months or years be pestered with discreet enquiries and guarded expressions of sympathy ; and how could an idol of the illustrated press, like Felicity Tann, retire from the public view ?

Something of this I put before Dick as he stood, swaying with fatigue, by the open door, a tumbler in one hand and a gnawed biscuit in the other.

"It's better for her to know now . . .," he repeated at short intervals. "You can call me a cad, if you like, for becoming engaged . . . I didn't think myself one . . . I *should* be a cad, though, if I let her go on with her eyes shut . . . Tell her the whole damned story . . . And say that whatever lie *she* likes to tell . . ."

"I shan't say anything to her," I answered. "Hadleigh's instructions were that she mustn't know of Flavia's existence . . ."

"Then *Hadleigh* can tell her."

When a man shrugs his shoulders at being called a cad, he is beyond the reach of milder persuasion.

"I'll write to him to-morrow," I said. "You'll leave Felicity to play the hand . . . ?"

"My God, it's the least I can do ! Anything she wants. Short of meeting her. That I can't and *won't* do."

Accordingly, when Felicity called to see Dick a week later, I had to receive her on his behalf while he crept out

of the flat. Even in her present distress, she remembered to say with all the prim correctness of her careful training that she did not know what I must think of her for coming unescorted to a “bachelor’s apartment”; she was sailing for New York next day and had to see Dick first on a matter of vital importance.

“Dr. Hadleigh . . .,” she began and then broke off with a shrug.

I wondered what Hadleigh had said, what he or any one could say to a girl who by no fault of her own was plainly and brutally not wanted. If this was to be called a tragedy, the cruellest part of it was the way in which every player was stabbed in his most sensitive part. I thought of Flavia, twelve months earlier, muttering in desperation that she would do almost anything to make Dick happy, but that—whatever she did—his last state might well be worse than his first. I thought of Lord Alster almost visibly shrinking as he whispered to a man forty years his junior that the honour of his family was being compromised. I thought of Dick, who had only wanted one thing in all his life and felt himself being cheated of it arbitrarily, senselessly.

And then I thought of this curled and scented young queen with the glossy black hair, the clear brown eyes and the perfect teeth, so spoilt and flattered, so hard and cold to the “ridiculous little Italian duke” or “the absurd darling of a French marquis”, who had abased themselves before her, and so puzzled by a phlegmatic giant like Dick, who had not.

“Dr. Hadleigh . . . ?,” I encouraged her and watched as she twisted Dick’s ring round and round her finger.

I shall never know how far she was attracted by his position, how far piqued by his indifference; but she had now been so stabbed in her vanity that, when she

recovered from her first bewilderment, I felt there was nothing that might not happen, nothing that she might not do.

I was sorry for her, but I believe I was even more frightened for Dick. And, if not frightened, I was sorriest of all for myself at having this interview thrust upon me.

3

It was the most difficult of my experience.

"I really don't know what's been happening," I said, as Felicity—refusing tea and declining to give me any message—sat silently in a corner of Dick's armchair with her eyes on the door. "We came back together from Dr. Wreyden's funeral, but since then he's only looked in here for a moment . . ."

"A woman's got hold of him," said Felicity.

"Did Dr. Hadleigh tell you so?," I enquired with a studied air of scepticism.

"I put two and two together. It would be too much to expect that Dick had never looked at any one else and, when this woman, whoever she is, heard he was engaged to me, I suppose she tried to get him back."

It was evident that Felicity did not guess the identity of "this woman", whoever she was.

"Since Dick came to live here," I said, "I've seen more of him than most people. No other woman is trying to get hold of him."

"Then why's he avoiding me as though I were a leper?," the girl demanded, jumping furiously to her feet. "Lord Alster says I must expect to find Dick 'a creature of moods'."

"In some ways . . .," I began; but Felicity swept on with a flash of annihilating scorn from her angry brown eyes:

"I asked if he meant that Dick had to be put away from time to time! Oh, *no*! What a shocking suggestion! But I could see he was hiding something . . ."

She checked herself on the verge of tears; and I asked if Dick had ever talked to her about the years since he came down from Oxford.

"He's temperamental," I explained. "When he left the army, I always felt it was because he knew he wouldn't make a success. He's already quarrelled with his party so much that it remains to be seen whether he'll make any great success of politics . . ."

"And do you mean," asked Felicity, "that he's now discovered he won't make a success of me?"

A too-sensitive vanity carries its own protection in a gluttonous and indiscriminating appetite for flattery.

"It would be very natural for him to wonder whether he could ever make you as happy as he would like. And as you *deserve* to be," I added, warming to my work. "Mustn't every man ask himself sometimes whether he's really justified . . . ? He's making himself responsible for some one else's whole life, you see."

There was no answer for several moments to this masterpiece of priggishness; and I tried to think whether I should do more harm than good if I brought about a reconciliation. The scandal would be scotched; Felicity's face would be saved; and, until Dick was married to some one else, he would continue to make life a purgatory for Flavia and himself. Against this, I could see no hint of passion, love or common consideration on either side.

"I shall have to think this over," Felicity murmured at last. "It all sounds to me perfectly crazy. If Dick's going to have these 'moods' when we're married . . . If you—or he—had any idea what I'd been through

these last weeks . . . I think it's absolutely unforgivable . . ."

"Unless you're prepared to forgive . . .," I began
"Though I'm not sure that's the right word."

If Dick had committed an infidelity of spirit, affecting to offer what was not his to give, he had done it before Felicity and he were bound to each other ; and his only thought now was to avoid being bound.

"Oh, of course *you* won't admit that any other woman could *possibly* be after him !," she sneered.

"I'm prepared to bet," I said, "that if you'd set a detective to shadow Dick for the last week . . . It's not *that*, Felicity, that you have to fear."

"Then there *is* something?," she broke in triumphantly.

Even at the time I did not feel that I need let my conscience disturb me with charges of truth suppressed and falsehood suggested. If she had not meant to "forgive" Dick on the slightest encouragement, she would not have come to the flat, she would not have remained on and on, fidgetting with his ring. He would no doubt have to pay for her forgiveness ; but, once he was convinced that Flavia was not for him, no other woman's cajolings or scoldings would penetrate his indifference.

"There's this," I answered : "Dick has very little to give. He's an oyster and a solitary oyster, who hardly ever opens out to any one. Leaving Hadleigh aside, I'm his only man friend. If you expect to find him a romantic lover of the Abelard type, you'll be disappointed. Perhaps now it doesn't seem quite so 'crazy' that he should have misgivings."

"If I believed that was all . . .," Felicity muttered suspiciously.

"Isn't it all that matters? If you're content with

that . . . And I think you must have been, when you accepted him : I should think it was the least ardent proposal you've had even from an Englishman . . . Once you're married, I should think he'd be tolerably faithful," I went on, " though that would depend on your handling of him. When he settles down, with a child or two . . ."

" I shall have to think this over carefully," Felicity told me again, as she got up to go.

4

I see from the books that I am only four years older than the present Dowager Countess Alster ; but I feel that in this conversation, now nearly thirty years old, I was talking like a grandfather. Then and perhaps always, I was conscious of a curiously undeveloped strain in Felicity's mind and character. In essence hard and cold, she seemed to know about a variety of things ; but, where feeling was required, she knew nothing. And so I found myself ladling out these improving sentiments on the sanctity of the home and the steadying influence of a family as though they were new discoveries.

To this girl, indeed, I believe they were. It had never entered her imagination that, if a man wanted her at all, he could fail to want her with all his heart and soul ; she had never envisaged the husband who by nature or through the chances of life had—in my own phrase—very little to give. When I told her that much would depend on her handling of Dick, I think she realized for the first time that marriage might be an affair of painful study and patient accommodation rather than an endless ritual of one-sided adoration.

Not for a moment do I suggest that she intended to come down from her niche or to forget that she was a courted beauty, an heiress, the " exquisite " Felicity Tann

at whose feet the impoverished nobility of three countries had laid their coronets. I only mean that this afternoon she divined the need of consolidating her niche. When—some two years later—I congratulated her on the birth of a son and heir, she told me that she hoped the next baby would be a girl. “You said,” she reminded me with rather an ominous smile, “that I must have several children if I hoped to hold Dick.”

This, however, is to jump far ahead of the time when Dick's family and friends were anxiously wondering whether he would consent to be held or even recaptured; and, if the anxiety was prolonged, if a reader of Captain Dutton's *Life* feel tempted to comment on the interval between Dick's engagement and marriage, I imagine that the explanation would have to be supplied by Felicity's father. In the spring of 1907 the Tanns fulfilled their promise of coming over to make the acquaintance of their future son-in-law and his family. Faithful to his undertaking that he would do whatever was required to save Felicity's face, Dick was waiting for the boat at Southampton; and my father, who might be taken as the barometer of the Croyle connection, wrote that I must let him know the moment “everything” was “arranged”.

It was Mr. Tann's first visit to England; and, as he seemed surprised by the absence of reporters at the quayside, I sought to win his confidence by making known that I was on the staff of the *Morning Standard*. He thanked me and said that, when he had a statement to make, he would avail himself of my services, but that he must wait until he had got his bearings.

I formed the opinion that he was the last man in the world to be hustled; and I spent the rest of the spring and summer having my first impression confirmed.

Felicity had, of course, come with her parents ; and they took a house for the season in Hill Street, where—with Lady Alster’s assistance—they entertained extensively, gave the ball at which Margaret Croyle came out and in general introduced themselves to the society in which Mrs. Richard Croyle would be expected to mix. It was assumed on all hands that the wedding would take place at the end of the summer, but no date had been settled when the Hill Street house was surrendered to its owners, nor when the Tanns returned to London after a farewell visit to Marston, nor when they sailed for New York, taking their daughter with them.

I began to wonder whether I had judged Felicity aright in telling myself that, if Dick did not ask to be forgiven, she would force her forgiveness on him. If she was maintaining the pretence of an engagement in the hopes of making a predetermined breach less abrupt, the part was surely being overplayed with all the luncheons and dinners that were given by the Alsters “to meet our future daughter-in-law”. Time went by, but there was still no statement for which Ogden Tann cared to avail himself of my services. For a while I was constrained to believe the story, which inevitably became current when the family returned to America without fixing a date, that there had been a hitch over the settlement. Then, in the last days of 1907 or the first of 1908, when I heard in quick succession that the girl was coming back alone, that she had quarrelled with her father, that she and Dick were to be married in the spring and that the quarrel was now composed, I fell back on a far simpler explanation. Felicity had in fact told her parents nothing of Dick’s unexplained disappearance ; they came prepared to be sentimentally indulgent to a love-lorn young couple ; and they were met by an abstracted and sullen

young man, lately recovered from an undefined "break-down", who quite obviously did not wish to marry their idolized daughter.

Almost I could hear Ogden Tann's slow nasal voice as he drawled: "*Say, listen, honey! That man's not in love with you!*"

Some such words must have been used; but my "documents" for this period consist chiefly of three or four brief conversations—after months of almost unbroken silence—in the course of which Dick would moon about my flat, talking of anything or nothing, until I could no longer keep my eyes open and then, following me into my bedroom, would spit out some confidence and turn on his heel, observing that he did not desire to hear any comment. The first confession came within a month of Felicity's first departure to New York and was restricted to the words:

"Well, once again, you were right and I was wrong."

A few days later he asked, with sublime detachment, if I could remember what I had said when "the girl"—Had he forgotten her name?—called to see him and he first hid in his bedroom and then tiptoed behind her back through the hall and into the street.

"She won't hear of breaking off the engagement yet," he explained. "I suppose it *would* seem rather sudden. Well, I told you to say I was in her hands. I wish to God, though, she didn't insist on seeing me before she does anything."

At Christmas he informed me that Felicity wished them to forget whatever it was that had threatened to set them apart. He did not repeat that he was still in her hands; but, when he told me that the Tanns "in all innocence" had written to propose a date for accepting Lady Alster's invitation to Marston, he added with noticeable concern

that it would be a good deal more difficult for Felicity to end the engagement when they had been shewn off together for two or three months.

The visit took place as I have described. I never heard from Dick that the parents insisted, at the end of it, on at least a postponement of the marriage, but there was a conspicuous absence of surprise in his voice, as though he had ceased to struggle, when he told me in the winter that the girl was returning to England alone.

"Her excellent father," he continued, "seems to think I also am among the fortune-hunters. He's warned Felicity that she won't get a penny if she marries without his consent and Felicity has told him he can keep his money and be damned into the bargain. Now I suppose it's up to me. . . . Plucky of her, I call it."

I deemed it expedient to agree ; but the Tann millions must have gone begging if they had not come, at her parents' death, to Felicity and, the moment he heard that Dick was prepared to marry her without a farthing, Ogden Tann had an excuse for letting her have her own way with this undemonstrative Englishman who could only be roused by a threat which had probably put earlier suitors to flight. The importance of the quarrel is that for a time Dick and Felicity were made to seem desperate and romantic figures, back to back against the world. There was something like enthusiasm in my reserved friend's voice when he told me that the church had been chosen and the date fixed.

Felicity, when next I met her alone, confined herself to saying that she had thought it all over most carefully and had decided to forgive Dick.

5

"*One son, one daughter*", says the last issue of *Who's Who* to contain the name of the third Viscount and first Earl Alster; and I see from the *Peerage* that Richard, Lord Marston, was born in 1909, Lady Beatrice Mary Croyle in 1911.

By this time, therefore, on my own light-hearted estimate, Dick might be considered, with his "one or two children", to have settled down. Whether he ever thought of Flavia in these years I am unable to say; that he did not meet or correspond with her till passion, as every one at least hoped, was cold and dead I can affirm from Flavia's own statement.

It was at the end of 1906 or the beginning of 1907 that we met again, about the time that Dick had given up his search for her and was saying: "Well, once more, you were right and I was wrong." I had been calling on my doctor one afternoon and, coming out into Wimpole Street, I saw Flavia walking in the direction of the Marylebone Road.

"I thought I was never going to see you again!," I exclaimed.

"Leslie!," she whispered with a sigh of huge relief. "I thought it was Dick! I think every one who speaks to me is Dick!"

"He's in London," I warned her. "Have you been here all the time?"

Flavia nodded:

"I've got a job with a young Scotch consultant; and mother's coming to join me. For God's sake don't tell Dick you've seen me! It would be too awful if I broke everything up again just as he was learning to do without

me. You know he came to Rose Cottage before father was even in his coffin? It was awful!"

I told her that I thought Dick had given up looking for her, but that, though she would be well advised to keep out of his way, there was no reason why she should keep out of mine.

"I've not had much time to see any one," she answered with a glance at her black dress. "And, as you may imagine, I've not had *very* much inclination. Father . . ."

"I've heard no details," I said. "It was pneumonia, wasn't it?"

For some moments Flavia looked ahead of her without answering, as though she were trying to see her father's life in perspective.

"I feel he was like a man who'd fallen overboard and couldn't swim," she then answered. "From the first he knew he must be drowned, but he went on struggling. And, one after another, people dived in to save him. Mother, me, uncle Roy. He knew they couldn't, he knew they'd probably be drowned too, but he couldn't help clutching at them, dragging them down . . ."

"And *you* couldn't help . . .," I began.

Flavia shrugged her shoulders and said something about her "job".

"It's not *love* that makes you dive in after a drowning man," she went on. "It's the awful sight of the man's *helplessness* . . . If you call it compassion . . ."

"Was there a great difference, in your case?," I asked.

We had reached the Marylebone Road; and Flavia pointed vaguely towards Regent's Park as though to indicate that this was where she lived.

"If you had all understood that," she continued,

"you might have understood about Dick and me. It was *compassion* . . . Though I suppose he couldn't be expected to see that. . . . Father was delirious at the end, but he had a lucid moment when he tried to give me a sort of parting message. 'Heaven helps those who help themselves', he kept repeating and then always stopped as though he couldn't find words for what he wanted to say. On the last night when I was making up his fire, he cried: 'Coals to Newcastle!' with an extraordinary air of discovery. It was the last thing he ever said and I linked it on to what he'd been repeating about Heaven. To look after people who could look after themselves was like carrying coals to Newcastle: Heaven ought to help those who *couldn't* help themselves. It was his way of thanking me—of excusing himself, if you like—and certainly of teaching me a lesson I shan't easily forget. The lesson of infinite charity to people who get into trouble through no one's fault but their own. I'd had a glimmering before. Oh, ever since I can remember. That's what drew me to Dick, not any desire for him . . ."

"I always knew that," I said.

Flavia pointed to a bench and sat down, smiling a little wistfully.

"And yet," she reminded me, "you were horrified when I told you I'd been wondering whether I cared enough for Dick to become his mistress. I've been avoiding you, Leslie, ever since father's death—I've not yet even thanked you for your letter of sympathy!—, but you were avoiding me before that."

"I was . . . stunned," I answered. "Don't you understand, my dear?"

Looking at her in profile, I saw that, though the chestnut-red hair peeping from under her black hat had all

its old lustre, her face was pinched and there were violet shadows under her grey eyes. She looked as fragile and unprotected as when Dick and I rescued her from Rose Cottage and took her up to the "Big House". And for the first time I understood the power that she so reluctantly exercised over him. Even if I had wished, I could not escape it.

"Understand what?," asked Flavia.

"Why, when . . . when a man loves you . . .," I stammered. "It's not wholly jealousy . . . When everything about you is *sacred* . . . It was the greatest shock of my life. That you could *mention* it . . ."

"That I could see how small a thing the body is? Have you never comforted a lost child by picking her up and kissing her?"

"That's not quite the same thing, is it?"

A slight shrug intimated that I at least should always see a difference that did not exist.

"Until passion comes in," Flavia replied, "the body and the spirit are things apart. It would mean a great deal to me now, if you took me in your arms and kissed me, because we've always loved each other; but, if you kissed Margaret Croyle because she seemed unhappy for some reason, or this girl that Dick's going to marry . . . If he is . . .," she broke off in palpable eagerness to turn the conversation. "I know nothing about her, I've no idea what she makes of Dick. According to uncle Roy, he simply vanished without a word . . ."

"We can talk about her later," I interrupted.

There must have been a change in my voice, for Flavia looked at her watch and jumped up with an expression of dismay.

"We can't talk about any one or anything later," she exclaimed. "Not to-day, I mean. I must fly!"

"Where are you living?," I asked.

"In Hampstead. It'll be easier for you, when you meet Dick, if you don't know the address."

"It won't be easier for me. Flavia, if I tell you that I think I *do* understand . . ."

"My dear, my dear, as long as there's any 'thinking' about it, you *don't*!"

"But can't *you* understand," I cried, "that I hate any other man even to *see* you? I hate this man you're working for, I hate every one who speaks to you. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes, I can. That's what makes it so difficult. I wonder if you'll *ever* understand about Dick and me. If he broke out again, as he well might . . . Don't say anything more now. I have your address, even if you haven't mine. I'll write and suggest a meeting, when I think it's safe . . ."

"But Dick doesn't see my letters!"

"When I think it's safe for us to meet," Flavia replied.

And with that I had to be content. It seemed likely enough that she would think it "safe" to meet even Dick after he married in 1908, certainly when young Richard was born in 1909, at worst when Beatrice arrived two years later. For all of us, the chapter was closed: this queer, unhappy chapter that finds no place in Captain Dutton's *Life* and is summarily concealed in the books of reference under a few colourless words about Dick's time in parliament, his marriage and the birth of his children. It was closed at last.

Or so I thought when Flavia wrote, after the wedding, to ask if I should like her to dine with me some night.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

"SUCCEEDED, 1912 . . ."

I

ON a January night in 1912 word reached the office of the *Morning Standard* that General Lord Alster had died that day at his Dorsetshire seat. My editor, unconsciously giving history a chance to repeat itself, sent the standing obituary to my room and asked if I would bring it up to date. Unlike Sir John Bunting some twenty years later, he shewed himself intimately acquainted both with the career that had just closed and with the one that was opening. As a keen party-man, he could not approve without reservations of the independent line that Dick so often took in the House of Commons; but he wished me to hold the balance fairly between the old peer and the new.

"I don't imagine Alster approved any more," he added. "The last time I had any talk with him, he seemed rather lonely and disappointed."

"He had outlived his era," I said.

"Then I daresay he was glad that he didn't have to go on outliving it."

Here, though I did not argue the point, I was not altogether inclined to agree. The question had indeed been given Dick to answer eight-and-forty hours earlier, when Roy Hadleigh asked whether he should continue administering oxygen to a man who could get no better and who was already beyond all feeling. Without hesitation, I was told, Dick had replied that his father would

never have given up on his own account and that they must not give up for him. Can his last years be summed up in fewer or better words?

Lonely he may well have been as his children, one after another, married and left home. I doubt, too, if he ever recovered from the shock of Lady Alster's death in the hunting-field. And, though I prefer "puzzled" to "disappointed", I will concede that he must have felt he had lingered on into a strange and disturbing period of history. Even in his seventy-sixth year, though, this old servant of the public would not have admitted that a man was ever too old or feeble for employment of some kind. Why, here was a government that handed back to the defeated Boers the country that it had lately been obliged to take from them, a government that imagined India could be administered on western lines, a government that starved the fighting forces in order to pay old-age pensions! The youngest was not too young nor the oldest too old for the task of saving his life's work.

"These politicians . . . If I had my way . . . Feller in a *cloth* cap, they tell me . . . And another one that I remember up against a lion in Trafalgar Square, haranguing the mob. One of His Majesty's *Ministers*, if you please . . ."

I could still hear the deep rumble, still see the long, spare frame stiffening as the old man rose, at our last meeting, to shake hands with me and confess that, his sight not being what it once was, he would be "mighty grateful", if I (He supposed he must no longer call me a "young shaver") would tell him "the news of the town" and explain to a simple soldier what the dickens "these fellers are up to".

As I tinkered with the obituary, I felt that Lord Alster

had certainly been puzzled for many years ; but I did not think, when I went down for the funeral, that he had been disappointed either in himself or in the children who followed in his footsteps and shouldered his burdens. John and Philip had both married within eighteen months of their elder brother, each choosing a soldier's daughter, and Margaret had followed about a year later with an admiral's son who was himself a captain, thereby providing the bravest possible display of uniforms, medals, arches of swords and—as a culmination—a bridal carriage shorn of its horses and dragged by blue-jackets up the hill from Marston church to the "Big House". As I stood by the open door of the family vault this January afternoon, I reflected that Lord Alster had survived to attend the christening of his first four grandchildren ; he had heard his baffling heir publicly described as "one of the coming men in the House of Commons" ; and in answer to punctual enquiries of Hadleigh and my father he was assured that Dick's "old trouble" shewed no signs of breaking out again.

What then remained but to await his summons to the last parade of all ? The title was now secure for two more generations, the estate for at least as long ; and the Croyle tradition, which had been faintly threatened in the days when Dick lived under the disturbingly radical influence of Flavia and the doctor, was reestablished when he married a wife who in political orthodoxy and social exclusiveness set herself to be more royalist than the king.

So, when the press expended its Latin on a scholarly hint that Lord Alster had chosen a happy moment to die, I was prepared to agree. My *confrères*, no doubt, intended to convey that he was being spared the imminent plunge into chaos, but I considered that he was

fortunate in not being compelled to loiter uselessly on a stage where his part was played.

Whether Dick was either fortunate or unfortunate in the moment of his father's death is less easy to say. He would have gained much freedom of development and lost little parental affection if he had been left an orphan when he went to his preparatory school. As this might not be, I think that in some ways it would have been better if Lord Alster had survived a short time longer. In 1912 Dick had been eight years in the House of Commons, six of them in opposition, and had carved a certain niche for himself. I do not believe that he would ever have become a great parliamentary figure, with his halting speech and his unfortunate habit of seeing two sides to every question; he was without taste for wire-pulling and had no skill in surrounding himself with more effective debaters; but after a few more years in the Commons the front benches on both sides might have been glad to be rid of him and, if he had been governing Madras or Bombay in 1914, he would—for better or worse—have been spared participation in the war. To some extent his father's death, occurring when it did, tied him to England for the next two years.

"In January, 1912, Lord Alster succumbed to bronchitis; and Richard Croyle succeeded as third viscount"; I quote the official *Life* and may add that this is one of the few statements that I do not feel obliged to challenge, though even here I am inclined to say, more colloquially :

"In 1912 the death of his father removed Dick from the House of Commons and left him, for the first time in his life, with nothing definite to do. If Felicity had worked to secure him an appointment suited to his years, he might

have had a distinguished career and at least a peaceful life ; but she hoped for the palm without the dust by dazzling London as a political hostess, while Dick—still at a loose end—was left for some critical months to play the part of Lady Alster's husband."

2

It was during these critical months that I resumed a friendship which Dick and I had suffered to languish since the day of his wedding, though we could have thrown pebbles at each other's windows in Whitehall Court and Richmond Terrace.

The responsibility, I think, must be laid primarily at Felicity's door. In part she was always bitterly and sometimes disastrously jealous of any one who seemed to have any influence over her husband, in part she could never forget that I had seen her at the humiliating season when she insisted on forgiving a man who did not mind whether he was forgiven or not so long as he was set free. I daresay, too, Dick felt that I knew embarrassingly much of the stormy chapter that closed when I signed the register at Saint Margaret's. Whatever the reason, after an exchange of dinners at the end of the honeymoon we drifted apart with insincere regrets on both sides that Saturdays were my only time for seeing friends and that he was always at the dower-house on Saturdays.

The regrets were insincere on my side in that I should never have got Flavia to dine with me if I had not been able to promise her that there was not the faintest danger of her meeting Dick. Once satisfied that it was "safe for us to meet", she invited herself—as I have narrated—on the morrow of Dick's wedding ; and, once assured

that she and I at least could be "friends and nothing more" until she proposed a change, she came almost every week that we were both in London. It must be superfluous for me to say that the terms on which we met were dictated by her. I was asked more than once in the next few years—by Roy Hadleigh, by my parents, by Felicity Alster—how I could be content with a platonic friendship; and, though my answers varied, I fear I never gave the true one, which was that I had no choice. As I had foreseen, by the time that Jimmy Wreyden was dead and Dick safely married, Mrs. Wreyden was a confirmed invalid; when Flavia declared that she could not leave her, I could only bow to her will.

To the best of my powers I have stuck to my part of spectator until this moment; and, if I have to obtrude my own relations with Flavia for a few lines, it is because I cannot disentangle them from her relations with Dick in the period immediately following his father's death. If only—I had been saying six years earlier—she would become engaged to me, he would give up thinking that she would ever become engaged to him; if only—I was to say again six months later—she were married to me, he might remember that he was married to some one else. Our "platonic friendship" did not make Dick's position any easier; and, if she or I or both of us were responsible for unsettling him, I can hardly continue to write as an Olympian onlooker. Why, then, did Flavia, who had once talked so eloquently about the duty which young people with their lives before them owed to themselves, now discover that her paramount duty was to nurse her mother? Why did she impose a penance that was equally hard for both of us to bear?

I suppose the barrier between us really dates from the day when she advanced the paradox that to be a man's

mistress only became in any way important if one was in love with him. I never have known, I never shall know, whether Flavia was ever in fact Dick's mistress ; and the point is immaterial. What divided us was our attitude to the theory. No doubt, if we had all of us been born twenty years later, we should have been less possessive on both sides, less insistent that the past of a woman or man should belong as absolutely to themselves or to us as the present or future. If *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* appeared now for the first time, it would almost need an introduction to explain a moral standard that is hardly less remote than a law against witchcraft ; but in the first years of the twentieth century it was a standard which one must accept or reject, without agreeing to differ. Until marriage, every woman had to be immaculate.

It was a standard which I accepted in those months of torment when I dared not communicate with Flavia for fear of learning an unbearable truth ; and I rejected it on the afternoon when I sat with her in Regent's Park, protesting that I thought I did now "understand". Our lives, I said, until we joined them, were to be our own affair. Was that not enough, then ? If it had been, we might have married the moment I could secure a licence ; but Flavia either did not believe in my conversion or required it to be more complete. She could not forget that I had "avoided" her. She suspected that I was magnanimously forgiving her or—yet worse—allowing her the benefit of the doubt. Unless we were to be tormented all our lives by the memory of those days or weeks that she had spent with Dick, I must learn that there was nothing to forgive.

How remote and irrelevant any post-war moralist would have found our heated debates on "real" and "technical" chastity ! I can still hear Flavia dismissing

the coldly complaisant wife as "a prostitute with a wedding-ring", still hear her asking how the significance of an act can be affected by a legal or ecclesiastical formula. Of lovers, surely, one should ask, not whether they are joined in wedlock, but whether they are joined in love! I hear myself trying to overwhelm her with a *reductio ad absurdum*.

"According to you," I would say, "unless a man and woman are in love with their hearts and minds, it's no more for them to live together than to dance together."

"Until you accept that," she would reply, "there'll be no understanding between us."

"And what's sauce for the unmarried is sauce for the married?"

"Oh, that's different!"

"How?," I asked. "So long as I keep my *heart* out of the business, the question of fidelity doesn't arise."

"No, you *don't* understand," Flavia would sigh.

"We're disagreeing," I used to expostulate, "and wasting our lives over something that's purely academic. How much longer . . .?"

"If you're not content with what I have to give . . .," Flavia would say. "You know I can't leave mother."

I was not content and I knew that her mother, who could have come to live with us, was only an excuse; but I knew also that, if I pressed for more, I should lose everything. In fairness to Flavia, the difference was anything but academic to her; and she more than once declared that for a husband and wife to disagree on morals was far worse than to disagree on religion. The reasons that kept us apart, however, are of interest only to ourselves; the fact that we remained apart was to have an important bearing on Dick's life, though neither of us thought of him as we argued week after week for

most of the four years between his marriage and his succession.

I doubt, indeed, if we mentioned his name more than three or four times until the night when Flavia dined with me to hear about the funeral. Inevitably then her mind went back to her last meeting with Lord Alster, when he had begged her—for Dick's sake, for Felicity's, for every one's—to go away till "this madness" had burnt itself out.

"If only," she sighed in a very familiar way, following the sigh with an exasperatingly familiar phrase, "poor *Dick* had been content with what I had to give! If he'd seen it was all I *could* give!"

"If only," I rejoined, "people who are in love could behave as though they were not in love!"

Flavia's grey eyes narrowed at this reminder of warnings disregarded; and she glanced round my small dining-room as though she were thinking of the days when we contrived her first holiday in London and she believed it was possible to be "friends and no more" with a man who had stubbornly set himself to marry her. Dick's writing-table, bequeathed or abandoned to me, still occupied the embrasure in the window overlooking the Embankment; in my other room the old "smoker's cabinet" still contained the pipes and tobacco-jar that he had omitted to take away.

"I should have thought half a loaf was better than no bread," she murmured. "I confess I miss Dick. I *liked* talking to him about politics and the army and what you *could* do in parliament and what you *couldn't*. Every day he used to write to me, for months and years . . . I should have thought he missed it too."

"I've no doubt he does, though he's never dared tell me so. He's never dared mention your name, since he

gave up looking for you. I don't suppose he dares think of you, deliberately."

"Even after all this time?," asked Flavia. "I should have thought that a wife and two children . . . Not that I want to play with fire, Heaven knows . . ."

I was about to say that I thought she still underestimated the strength of Dick's obsession. Before I could speak, however, the door behind me opened and my servant announced "Lord Alster". Unused as yet to thinking of anybody under this style but the man whose long coffin I had seen a few days earlier winding on a gun-limber through the snow-covered woods of Marston Abbas, I thought I must have misheard the name; but, before I could ask to have it repeated, Dick was standing in the doorway.

3

The meeting would have been even more difficult if I had not elicited from his gabbled apology that he was calling on the chance of being given some dinner. At a club, he explained, well-meaning acquaintances—"Balaclava veterans to a man!"—would have worried him with their sympathy; he did not relish a solitary meal in his own empty house; and, remembering it was a Saturday, he had counted on finding me at home.

"I thought you would be at Marston," I said in subconscious apology to Flavia for this encounter.

"There was so much for me to arrange in London," he answered, as he shook hands with her. "I thought, if I could get your opinion on one or two points . . . *Why* your admirable Creighton didn't say you had a party . . ."

"You lived here so long," I said, "that you're considered—quite rightly—to have the run of the place.

Sit down ! There's enough for three. Unless you'd like to wash ? "

In the petty bustle of getting another cover laid and plying Dick with sherry and biscuits till more substantial fare was ready, I tided over the embarrassment of his arrival ; and, though he addressed himself exclusively to me after asking Flavia's permission to talk business for a moment, he gave no sign of being ill at ease. If the meeting was the shock that I should have imagined, I really think he was too tired and hungry, too dazed by the loss of his father and the long-drawn melancholy of the last week to feel anything else acutely. In a black coat and trousers, with his narrow head drooping, he looked like a sick bird of prey ; and, though I begged him to eat something before he began to talk, he replied that the sooner I gave my advice the longer he would have to think over it and that, frankly, with a tired brain he needed more time than usual for making up his mind.

"It's a question of what I'm to do with myself *now*," he explained. "I argued things out with you before leaving the army and going into the House. You seemed the natural person to consult over the present position."

I asked whether his future had not really been decided for him : John or Philip, I presumed, would now succeed him in the family seat and he would himself direct our destinies from "another place". I was informed, however, that the problem was not so simple as this : one unit of a conservative minority in the House of Commons had a certain value, but—in the very words that he had used before resigning his commission in the Guards—there was nothing for him to do, as one unit of an overwhelming conservative majority in the House of Lords, that a hundred other men could not do as well or better.

"I'm rather young to vegetate in the country," he continued. "And as for a purely social life in London! That's beneath any proper man's dignity."

"You talked some years ago," I reminded him, "of trying to get hold of a governorship somewhere."

"Felicity says she would have to do some spade-work first. Entertaining the right people here and at Marston, you know. I'm rather out of favour with my party."

"Well, I don't suppose she'd mind that."

"It means waiting . . . Have your people told you that Marston is to be modernized? Yes! Felicity declines to spend a night there till we've put in central heating and about a dozen more bathrooms. *I'm* prepared to start quite humbly with New South Wales or Queensland, but she hopes to make such a splash that we should be offered at least Canada."

This did not surprise me. Though the new Lady Alster had been suitably grief-stricken at her father-in-law's funeral, I thought that she was enjoying the sensation of being a viscountess. She would enjoy being mistress of Marston; and, if her house-parties for the present lacked the distinction of those splendid battle-pieces which Dick used to describe to me as a boy, I felt that in time the new comfort of the place might attract a sufficiency of field-m Marshals. She would enjoy the spade-work of entertaining cabinet ministers in Richmond Terrace. Most of all would she enjoy the fruits of her labour when the guard turned out to present arms as she drove with His Excellency in and out of their Government House grounds.

Whether Dick would enjoy it as much he had not revealed. Perhaps he did not know, perhaps he wanted me to tell him.

"If you're turning Marston upside-down," I said, "I

suppose you'll make London your headquarters. I hope I shall see rather more of you."

There was a lost-dog air about him that made me feel he had come less to seek my advice than to stretch himself before a familiar fire. I was reminded of the night when he returned from the Unionist Club to ask whether I would take him in if I had not made other arrangements; of the other nights when he had crawled back like a prodigal for no other purpose, it seemed, than to tell me I had been right and he wrong. I did not anticipate any confession of this kind now; but I felt that my little white-painted flat, however mixed its associations, was more of a home to him than Richmond Terrace or the dower-house or even Marston. He may have feared his father, but he seemed curiously helpless without him.

"I hope so, too," he responded with something like warmth. "The House has been an extraordinary *tie*, you know. While my poor father was dying, I couldn't help thinking what an eternity it was since I used to spend three or four months in every year at Marston. It's an incredible time since I've seen you," he threw out abruptly, turning to Flavia.

It was almost the first moment, since he came in, that he had seemed to be aware of her presence; and I wondered whether he had been waiting till he could evolve a formula for placing her as a half-forgotten friend of his childhood.

"I left Dorsetshire after my father's death," she replied as though all three of us did not remember the circumstances of her leaving.

"And you've been in London ever since?"

"Well, Hampstead."

"You must come and dine when we're out of mourning," said Dick mechanically. "You've never met

Felicity, have you? I wonder how you'll get on! You always used to say *I* was a reactionary. No! 'Obscurantist' was your word! Felicity, you may be amused to hear, regards me as a dangerous revolutionary because I occasionally breakfast with Lloyd George. She's the *complete* die-hard. The result, I suppose, of being brought up in a country where all men are free and equal . . . Lord, what wrangles we three used to have!" he continued with a faint laugh. "Well, you always said that Leslie and I must educate our party. 'Letting daylight in', you called it. I've tried my best, but it hasn't done much good to any one. I suppose, nowadays, you're a suffragette and all that sort of thing?"

"Not militant," Flavia answered. "You see, I have my living to earn, so I couldn't afford a month in Holloway. Besides, I don't believe the vote's going to make any material difference to anybody, it's the moral effect I'm after. Getting rid of our present *status* . . ."

"Overturning 'the tyranny of the past'?" I suggested.

If I had not used the phrase, Dick would have. We were all deliberately recreating the atmosphere of ten years before, perhaps to see if we could recreate it; all using the old language and reverting to the old tone of edged banter. I had expected that Dick would make an excuse to leave the moment he had swallowed his dinner; but he sat on, talking and now actually laughing as in old days, and, when his cigar was finished, I saw him moving automatically to the "smoker's cabinet" where his tobacco-jar still preserved the dry dust of five years earlier.

As we sparred amicably together, I wondered whether he too was thinking that half a loaf might have been better than no bread. When the time arrived for me to take

Flavia home, he said again that she must come and dine when Felicity and he resumed their entertaining. He did not, however, ask for her address; and, when I returned from Hampstead to find him still sitting over the fire, his only reference to her was that he supposed, when she talked of having her living to earn, she was still engaged in her old dispensing work.

I had decided that I should hear no more of this invitation when Felicity telephoned some months later to ask if I could dine on the following Saturday and whether I knew the address of a girl who had once lived at Marston, a Miss Wreyden whom Dick had apparently met again with me that winter.

4

I have never wholly understood Felicity's eagerness to bring about this meeting. It is clear to me that it was not done at Dick's suggestion: if he had been anxious to meet Flavia—may I not say: if he had not been most anxious not to meet her?—, he could have asked her where she was living, or, if it escaped his mind at the time, he could have asked me.

I assume, therefore, that the initiative came from Felicity. I assume, further, that she wished to meet Flavia because she had either heard so much about her or had never heard of her before. It does not greatly matter which: Dick mentions the name of his old friend Flavia Wreyden for the first time and Felicity wonders why it has never been mentioned before, or he reports for the first time that an old friend, Flavia Wreyden, with whose name she is well acquainted, is in London.

Perhaps I am going too far in presuming that she was even called an old friend; he was more likely to have called her "a girl I knew at Marston, when I was a

boy", but I feel sure I am not going too far in presuming that Felicity heard of her existence through Dick. She had the manner, at this time, of one who expected her husband to give an account of himself for every moment of the day and night, while he—with nothing now to hide—did his best to fulfil her expectations. A girl whom Dick had known as a child? A girl who was living at Marston when Felicity first went there, but whom she had not been allowed to meet? For a woman who once boasted to me of her power to put two and two together, it was a short step to identify Flavia with the vampire who, in her own phrase, had "got hold of him".

Why then did she wish to meet her? It sounds spiteful to suggest that she wanted to triumph over her; but I cannot persuade myself that she desired to make friends with—still less to hand back as a friend to Dick—a girl who had once been a formidable rival. Was she merely curious to see what kind of woman had attracted her husband?

These were a few of the questions that I asked myself as I gave the address, the questions that I asked myself again when Flavia wrote: "*Don't be surprised if you meet me at dinner next Saturday: I couldn't get out of it*", the questions that were still unanswered as I walked from Whitehall Court to Richmond Terrace. Others were to follow; and I wondered if Flavia still fancied that she could achieve a limited-liability friendship. In her letter she had argued with some force that she was being given the choice of three nights and that, if she declined too uncompromisingly, Felicity would suspect there was something behind her refusal; but was it impossible that she wanted to see the kind of woman that Dick had married? The more I thought of this party, the less I liked it. Why had three Saturdays in succession been

offered to a girl who hardly dined out twice a month ? And why had Felicity invited me for a quarter-past eight and Flavia for half-past ?

It was not the honest blunder that my innocent-eyed hostess pretended, for she was waiting for me, whereas Dick did not come in by one door until Flavia was coming in by the other, on the stroke of the half-hour and without a suggestion that they were either of them late. Felicity, I repeat, was waiting for me, with a carefully prepared speech : " You've come in all your glory ! I meant to tell you a short coat : it's only the four of us. And I *believe* I said half-past eight. Poor you ! I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me till Dick appears."

This was unconvincing enough in one who never made a mistake in her times or dates, but after the speech she produced an artless succession of trivial misstatements which she encouraged me to correct with the greatest particularity. Dr. Wreyden had been in partnership, had he not, with Dr. Hadleigh ? *Not* so ? Oh . . . Well, truth to tell, Felicity had not understood how Marston could support two doctors. Presumably, then, as the Wreydens had lived at Rose Cottage, they were *protégés* of her late father-in-law. The house, by the way, was now occupied by one of old Lord Alster's brother-officers who had fallen on evil days. It was nice when one could help people like that, but poor Mrs. Wreyden must have hated being turned out of that charming little cottage when her husband died. And how curious to think that the cottage had been standing for ten or twenty years before Columbus discovered America !

It was ingeniously done ; but I hope, without undue vanity, that my answer was equally ingenious. In about six short sentences I explained that Jimmy Wreyden had been an invalid for all the years I had known him,

that Flavia and I—as only children—had spent our holidays with the young Croyles and that, far from being turned out of Rose Cottage, Mrs. Wreyden had gone to London, leaving Lord Alster for a time without a tenant, when Flavia went to work with Dr. McKechnie. We had all, I added, been great friends as children; but, when Dick came to see me after his father's death, he and Flavia were calculating that they had not met since some time before the general election of 1906.

As Felicity had not come to England until some months later, I did not think it necessary to underline that Flavia had not tried to "get" Dick "back".

"And do I call her 'Doctor' or 'Miss'?" asked Felicity. "And what's her special line?"

"You call her 'Miss'," I answered. "And she has no special line. Her father had next to no money, so she qualified as a dispenser."

"As a . . . ?"

"Dispenser," I repeated.

"You mean she makes up prescriptions?" Felicity exclaimed; and I could see that she would be patronizing the moment a chance offered. "How frightfully clever of her! I can never read the wretched things. And what fun! That lovely sealing-wax they use."

"You must ask her to give you a stick," I said. "Or I'll give you one myself as a Christmas present. She's as poor as a church mouse, so perhaps it wouldn't be fair to ask her."

Felicity allowed the corners of her mouth to droop sympathetically.

"You mean that *really*?" she murmured. "How dreadfully hard for her! I gather, from your account . . ." She checked on the verge of saying: "*She's*

quite a lady" and substituted: "Can't anybody *do* anything for her?"

"I don't think she wants anybody to do anything for her," I answered. "She makes enough to support her mother and herself. A career, ever since she was a child . . ."

"Surely the *only* career for a *woman*," Felicity struck in, "is to *marry*."

"And Flavia could marry any day of the week," I answered, "if she wanted. I know she's refused at least one offer that most girls would sell their souls for. No doubt when she finds a man who's worth more to her than her independence . . ."

"I should have thought every woman wanted *children*," said Felicity, glancing at a leather-framed photograph which I thought had been pushed into aggressive prominence.

"That's a subject I've never discussed with her," I said. "If she does, there's still plenty of time."

"It's a mistake to leave things too long. I've known so many girls in America who wouldn't give up their 'independence', as you call it, till they'd enjoyed themselves a bit. Then when their looks began to leave them . . ."

"I don't think you'll say that's happening yet with Flavia," I interrupted. "My own opinion, though I may be prejudiced, is that she becomes more beautiful every time I see her; and I will admit that I see her just as often as I possibly can."

Felicity seemed faintly puzzled.

"You speak as if you were in love with her!"

"I always have been!", I declared. "The thing's a public scandal."

"But I mean seriously. If she's all you say . . . It

would be the best possible thing for *you*, I daresay for *both* of you. Oh, why don't you? I know what I'm talking about, Leslie. It's all right *now*, but when a man becomes *set*, when a woman begins to age . . ."

"She must be getting so tired of my proposals," I said. "Now, if *you* would put in a word . . . Point out the sterling qualities I'm too modest to mention. She would get youth, good health, an affectionate disposition . . ."

"She'd get *security*, which is more important than anything," Felicity replied. "Really, it would be a charity!"

"When you've met her," I begged, "tell me whether you think she's the sort of person who would allow herself to be married for charity. Otherwise . . . We're excellent friends, so why disturb it? I really think she has a genius for friendship. I hope you and she will be friends," I concluded insincerely, as the door opened and Flavia was announced.

5

My insincerity was venial because it did not deceive and was not intended to deceive any one. A sensible man does not hope for the moon; and I did not think it any less extravagant that Felicity should wish to make friends with a girl whom she was only at pains to meet through curiosity. As Dick came in by one door, as Flavia came in by another, as I stood back, as Felicity went forward to welcome her guest, I felt that all four of us must be counting the points of contrast between these two young women.

They had no common ground between them except the claims that they had established on Dick. Flavia was tall and feminine in all her lines. Her red-chestnut hair

and white skin gave, to me at least, an impression of natural richness that made her so independent of clothes and jewels that, if I had been an artist, I should have wanted to paint her without any. She was sure of herself and therefore at ease even when she must have felt that her dress and person and speech and movements were all being studied critically. Felicity, even after her two children, was still "exquisitely" small and perfectly proportioned; she had wealth and position to give her confidence; and yet all the time I felt that she was listening to her own voice and watching her own movements in dread of a solecism.

The differences increased when we went in to dinner; and I doubt if I can sum them up better than by saying that the same thing never mattered to both. In conversation Flavia made preposterous statements and espoused impossible views, which at the same time were stimulating, while Felicity was coldly and dismally correct: it did not matter that the one tied herself in knots, but it mattered supremely that the other should not raise a laugh against herself. It mattered to Felicity—and she knew Miss Wreyden would sympathize!—that she could not find a London jeweller to reset some of the old-fashioned Alster heirlooms, but it did not matter to Flavia that she had not even a coral necklace to wear. So throughout an evening that became ever more dreary. It mattered to Flavia, who lived every minute of her life, that, now we had all come together again, we should enjoy ourselves; it only mattered to Felicity that she had no part in the days when we had enjoyed ourselves before, the days that I am afraid we discussed more and more over her inanimate but attentive person.

It was the attentiveness of one who had set herself to find out what her husband had ever seen in a girl who

was happy to make up prescriptions for a living. I do not think, in the light of what happened afterwards, that I am being unfair in saying that, if Flavia could have been transfixd with a single shaft of disparagement as "dull" or "common" or "flashy" or "genteel", Felicity would have been compensated for the wound to her vanity half-a-dozen years earlier. Unfortunately or fortunately, Flavia had the incommunicable gift of natural fitness that rendered her incapable of striking the false note against which, I doubt not, poor uneasy Felicity had been untiringly warned at all her expensive schools. I could not feel that this last and greatest difference would dispose them to friendship.

If such a miracle came to pass, I felt too that, in one way or another, Dick would pay for it. As he had not invited Flavia to this dinner, it could be assumed that he did not want her. He had cut the knot once; and he did not choose to see the frayed ends being spliced together. What possible good, he must have asked, could it do? A married man, the father of children, was no longer free to seek a confidante outside the circle of his own family. There was a gruffness in his voice, as though he were disclaiming responsibility in advance, when he told Flavia that it was good of her to come all the way from Hampstead for what was in no sense a party.

As they talked, I studied Felicity's face in the hope of discovering why she had brought us all together. There was no hint of a private understanding between these childhood's friends now grinding out perfunctory conversation about three generations of Croyles; and, though I thought for one moment that I had lighted on a possible explanation, I am by no means sure that I was right. We were discussing Dick's future; and Felicity, disclaiming all knowledge of his plans, added with a

touch of acidity that no doubt he considered her incapable, as an American, of understanding English politics. Was this a suggestion that he withheld his confidence from her because he was giving it to some one else? I was already acquainted with Felicity's fatal habit of "putting two and two together", though I should have described it rather differently as a habit of taking x to be her own dues, y the amount to which Dick (or "Richard", as she now persisted in calling him) fell short and the result— $x-y$ —as the homage that he was paying to a rival. If this was the explanation, she had obviously not believed me before dinner, when I said that Dick and Flavia had not met for more than six years; and, though she might not be definitely persuaded that here was the woman to whom he carried his troubles when he pretended to be kept late at the House, she had at least decided that she must study her till she was sure.

I cannot feel that she collected much evidence this evening; and the dinner was punctuated with lengthening silences until Dick began to discuss the idea of work abroad. Then indeed Flavia did display a certain vivacity in arguing that he would be better employed exerting a moderating influence in the House of Lords.

"Apart from everything else," she added, "I can't imagine how any one could bear to leave a house like Marston . . ."

"It was what his father always had in mind for him," said Felicity, as though this must be enough to keep any outsider from volunteering advice.

Flavia turned to Dick with a smile that asked his leave to speak frankly.

"And with all respect to Lord Alster," she answered, "that's the worst possible recommendation, so far as I'm concerned. I had the greatest admiration and gratitude

and affection for your father-in-law, Lady Alster, but I've always felt and I've always told Dick that he had a devastating influence on *him*. The ideas of one generation *forced* down the throat of the next . . . I've very often wondered what would have happened, Dick, if he'd died when he retired from the army. That was about '98, wasn't it? When I first got to know you all?"

"If I'd succeeded when I was sixteen?," Dick murmured thoughtfully. "Lord knows! I don't suppose anything would have worked out quite as it has, but it's so hard to put yourself back . . ."

Rather unexpectedly, Felicity broke in to ask:

"But if you could? Is there anything you'd change? I always thought that you and your father . . . I daresay I never knew either of you as well as Miss Wreyden . . ."

As she paused, I at least—and I think Dick and Flavia with me—spent a moment trying to imagine what would have happened if he had succeeded while he was at Eton. I have said that Lord Alster's death, coming when it did, had the effect of leaving Dick at a loose end, but I am confident that this was not the way in which the question presented itself to him. Believing always that he had been cheated arbitrarily by his parents' opposition or by Jimmy Wreyden's failings or by the fact that he had himself blundered into other ties, Dick was feeling now that, if he had been his own master, nothing would have kept him from Flavia. I saw his face flushing as he tried to put the thought from him. And I damned Felicity as a fool for challenging him.

"If I could bring my father back to life . . .," he began rather solemnly. "Which reminds me that I haven't yet filled in those forms for the reference-books," he broke off. "'Born such-and-such a date, married

so-and-so, succeeded . . . Damned nonsense, I call it. How can it matter to any human being *when* I was born or *when* I succeeded? And, now that the radicals have crippled the unfortunate House of Lords, I shouldn't have thought that the *fact* of succeeding mattered. To vote against some lunatic bill with the knowledge that in two years' time it will become law just the same . . ."

I felt that all this mattered very much to Felicity. She had waited for this day; it was she, rather than Dick, who was succeeding; and she was not pleased by his casual handling of her life's opportunity.

"I hope you aren't going to add: '*How can it matter whom I married?*'," she observed rather caustically.

"You know I shouldn't dream of saying such a thing," Dick answered impatiently.

"But you haven't answered my question," Felicity persisted. "If you *could* put yourself back . . . ?"

"Surely you don't need it answered?," he asked with a smile that was more dutiful than spontaneous.

CHAPTER TWO

“ MAJOR, THE DORSET REGIMENT . . . ”

I

THE official biography says little of the Alsters' activities between 1912, when Dick—or, as I prefer to say, Felicity—succeeded to the title, and 1914, when he received a commission in the Dorset Regiment and she became commandant of the Marston general military hospital.

One is told, to be sure, that throughout these stormy days “ *Lord Alster attended the House of Lords regularly* ” and Captain Dutton records—with an air of an afterthought, when war was raging—that “ *he had done valuable work for the territorial-army organization in his own county* ” ; but the uninitiated reader is left with the impression that Dick and his biographer were marking time for two and a half years. It is hard to imagine anything more remote from the truth. This was the period in which Dick got to grips with what he considered his life's work ; and the war, far from “ *providing another Croyle with his opportunity* ” , merely stultified the efforts of one Croyle to make war impossible.

It was also a period of acute domestic tension, though Captain Dutton could hardly be expected to know anything about this and I shall only touch on it myself in so far as I consider Dick's public life to have been conditioned by it. Active or passive disagreement may be assumed between two strong-willed people who marry without love or understanding ; but a biographer is only required

to notice those conflicts which affect his subject's career and I have tried from the outset to omit everything that did not contribute in some way to building up the structure of our late Australian governor-general. Certain cells were added on the night that Flavia and I first dined together in Richmond Terrace ; and the Dorset Regiment received the promise of an unexpected recruit two years later when Dick lunched with me next day to discuss Felicity's political ambitions.

"It's a pity she flies so high," were his opening words. "I should be quite content to start at the bottom of the ladder and I believe there are jobs I could have to-day for the asking."

"I suppose most women in her position want to try their hands with a political *salon*," I said.

"But it's wasted labour if I unravel by day the web she's been weaving overnight. And I *don't* see my way to toeing the line drawn by Lansdowne and Bonar Law when things of greater importance are at stake. This damned 'party ticket', as Felicity calls it . . . You may or may not know, I've been slaving away the last few years for what my young brothers call 'Haldane's Hopefuls' . . ."

I knew, perhaps to my cost, for in the last six or eight years before the war more than one exasperated whip would beg me to reason with my unaccommodating friend. The new army, indeed, had become with Dick a fixed idea by which he tested all other issues. Was there a threat of trouble with Germany over Agadir ? Well, he would say, that might be a blessing in disguise if it brought men into the territorial camps and officers' training corps. Was it the menace of civil war in Ulster ? That was another matter : between them Carson and Redmond were drawing into their volunteer armies the

material that should have been at the disposal of the War Office. In the savage controversies of this time—the Lloyd George budget, the taxation of land values, the veto of the House of Lords and Irish home-rule—Dick shewed a lack of party-spirit that was astonishing in any one of his conservative, military, landowning and “ascendancy” upbringing. To one and all of these questions his invariable attitude was that no doubt much could be said on both sides, but that it was the duty of moderate men to find a solution of essentially minor problems before they swelled to overshadow things that really mattered.

“I don’t want you to go against your convictions,” I said, “but I’ve long thought that in this army business you’re out-Heroding Herod. You aren’t content with the Haldane scheme. Until you have universal service on the continental pattern . . .”

“As you yourself *always* wanted,” he reminded me.

“In the arrogant old days when I thought we had a mission to paint the map red,” I returned. “I want an army for defence only now.”

“And no one’s going to attack us when every man between eighteen and fifty has been trained to use a rifle. That’s my point, Leslie! My army will never need to *fight*.”

“It will never be given a chance to train,” I said. “There’ll be a ‘preventive war’ first; and you’ll have asked for it. After all, *we* argue that Germany has an army big enough for all conceivable purposes of defence and that, if she adds a colossal navy to it, she’s clearly aiming at us. Well, Germany would argue that, as we have a navy adequate to all our needs, we should be challenging her if we enrolled an army on continental lines.”

We wrangled inconclusively for some time longer, at the end of which Dick grumbled that I was not helping him with the problem of Felicity.

"She's dead-keen that I should do something 'worthy of my position', as she calls it," he explained. "By the way, you needn't tell her I've been lunching here. She sometimes seems to think that I'm too easily talked over by people. You . . . And Hadleigh . . ."

It was unnecessary for me to ask: "*And Flavia?*", because I remembered Felicity's look of irritation the night before when Flavia cast her vote for remaining in England.

"You mean," I said, "that I shall be held responsible if I say that you seem to be rather at cross-purposes over these political parties?"

"She'd wonder who'd been setting me against them. The trouble is . . . We get on awfully well, Felicity's a darling . . . At the same time . . . It's all rot for her to say I don't discuss certain things because she's an American and wouldn't understand . . . It's just that they don't interest her. What we've been saying about the Haldane scheme, for instance . . . When a thing bores her, she assumes it must bore me. If I say it doesn't, she thinks that some one else . . . I can't explain!"

I assured Dick that he could count on my discretion; but I felt, though I did not tell him so, that no explanation was necessary. Felicity, I felt confident now, had invited Flavia in the hope of discovering if she was Dick's adviser. Later, when he still refused to "toe the line" or shake off his territorial obsession, she laid the blame at Flavia's door. And, as there was no other means of counteracting her influence, she set herself to annihilate Flavia.

As I shall shew, Flavia was the last person to be annihilated without a struggle; and there ensued two

weary years of antagonism, two years of obstinacy and mutual defiance, two years of frustration and waste that left us all where we had been before, only two years more fretful and embittered. Felicity's career as a political hostess was cut short after about four months, Dick continued to vote for and against his nominal leaders, the high position at which she aimed and the low one which he would have accepted both eluded him and at the end of these two years he was still in England, still feeling—I daresay—that I had not helped him much with "the problem of Felicity".

As Flavia was to observe in the first week of August, 1914:

"It took a European war to bring the fool-woman to her senses."

2

This, to be sure, is not wholly fair.

If any one person can be held accountable for the "tension" to which I have referred, it must obviously be Felicity; but excuses can be made for her and I am not prepared to go farther at present than to say that she quite wantonly laid the train for an explosion when she insisted on inviting Flavia to Richmond Terrace. No doubt she would plead that, though she had forgiven Dick for running away at the beginning of their engagement, she could not forgive him for remaining away; and in fact, though she had borne him two children, he was always a hundred miles from her in spirit even when they were living in the same house and sharing the same room. A wife was entitled, she might say, to take any steps she pleased to find out why her husband was neglecting her; and, as she could not believe that he was wearied by the emptiness of her exquisite little head or that he had never

been strongly attracted by her exquisite little body, she must discover what other woman had bewitched and stolen him from her. It was surely more dignified to invite the girl to the house than to set a watch on Dick ?

Something of this kind was in fact said to me by Mrs. Ogden Tann when the deadlock had become complete.

Up to this point I am ready to state a case for Felicity ; and I should defend her even more warmly if I had not thought at their first meeting that she was avenging herself—with her parade of husband, children, house and clothes—on a presumably defeated rival. My Lady Alster, that night, could not have been insured for less than ten thousand pounds nor Miss Wreyden for more than ten. I was rather disgusted by the vulgarity of the attack ; but, as Flavia did not mind, it was not for me to mind for her and I only threw up my brief for Felicity when she followed her first invitation with a second and a third. This, I said, meant mischief ; and, remembering Dick's phrase about the people who were supposed to “talk” him “over”, I felt that he and I and Flavia and Hadleigh were in some way going to be taught, once and for all, who was mistress of Richmond Terrace and Marston Abbas.

The lesson in store for us all was indicated one Sunday in the early summer of 1912 when Flavia suggested that I should take her on the river. She seemed rather silent in the train, rather preoccupied throughout luncheon at Skindle's, but I was given no hint of the reason until she asked me casually if I was going to a political reception at the Alsters' in about three weeks' time.

“I loathe crushes,” I said, “but I'll go if you'd like me to take you.”

“I've been asked to dine first,” she answered. “I've . . . hesitated a little about accepting.”

As I remembered chiefly the dulness of the last dinner, I wondered a little that Flavia hesitated to refuse out of hand.

"It would be easier to decide if you knew who else was going to be there," I said. "There's a certain stickiness about these formal parties."

"Mrs. Whitman—I suppose that's the writer—has been *asked*. Her invitation came in my envelope."

"I shouldn't have thought 'Whitman' and 'Wreyden' were easy to confuse, but anything's possible with Felicity's handwriting. She seems to think legibility is the brand of a middle-class education."

"And would you say anything was possible with Felicity?"

There was a note of pent rage in Flavia's voice that I had never heard before; and I sat up at my end of the punt as though she had run a knife into me.

"What's she been doing?," I asked.

"Giving herself away for what she is!," Flavia replied between her teeth. "It makes no difference if it was an honest mistake, though I don't believe it *was*. There was too much of it, she'd been too clever in thinking of the things that would *really* wound . . ."

"But I don't understand . . ."

Flavia lay back with one hand over her eyes, waiting to recover control of herself. She was breathing quickly; and I could see the pulses in her neck throbbing.

"She wrote me a model letter," she answered at last. "It would give 'Richard' and her *such* pleasure if I would dine . . . *That* went to Mrs. Whitman and was sent on later with an apology for the *too* stupid mistake. *I* got the one that was meant for Mrs. Whitman. If it *was*."

"What did she say?," I asked, as Flavia paused again.

A swift shake of her head indicated that she was still too much hurt to turn the knives gratuitously in her wounds.

"She *explained* me," she answered acidly. "You may be glad to hear that I'm quite all right for you and Mrs. Whitman to know. It's almost your *duty*, in fact, to be nice to me, because I don't have much of a time and it's through no fault of mine and I'm quite amazingly plucky in the way I do quite *menial* work without a *word* of complaint. Even if I seem a little out of place, you must all be charitable and I'm really a *lady*, you must understand." The words poured out in a single breath and left Flavia panting. "Assume it's all true," she continued. "Is it necessary to splash it all out over a woman I shall probably not even shake hands with? And you may be sure she's not the only one who's been warned against me. After this, I think it's a waste of time to pretend there was any mistake about the envelope."

My first feeling was one of relief. Though I should have liked to contrive an ingenious revenge on Felicity, I had felt from the first that nothing but unpleasantness could come of this unnatural association; and, though I had affected to agree that Felicity must not be allowed to think Flavia was afraid of meeting her, I suspected that Flavia was more than half moved by a desire to see whether anything of her old friendship with Dick could be salved.

"Quite definitely," I said, "you can never set foot in that house again . . ."

"You want me to give her a walk-over?," Flavia broke in, her grey eyes bright with hostility. "One little sneer from one little purse-proud snob is to crumple me up! Is it? And, if Dick asks whether I'm coming, he's to be told: 'No. She *probably feels she'd be a little out of her*

element. Oh, is he? I didn't know I had any pride till now, but I evidently have . . ."

"And I wish," I interrupted, "it would make you see it's *impossible* for you to dine with a woman who finds it necessary to apologize for you."

"I don't think she'll find it necessary to apologize for me by the time I leave," said Flavia. "Pride . . . If *you've* anything to say on that subject, my dear, you'd better say it to *her*. I should have thought *her ladyship* might have been too proud to ferret for gossip in her own servants' hall. You may be sure Dick and uncle Roy and your people haven't told her anything. Viscountesses *shouldn't* nose for scraps in the gutter. I can set her an example in *that* respect."

I allowed several minutes to pass before attempting a reply. In courage, Felicity was no match for her opponent and I did not doubt that Flavia would overwhelm her by sheer force of personality. Though she upheld her private honour, however, I felt that in some fashion Dick would be made to pay.

"If you challenge her," I said, "she must assume you read her letter to the bitter end . . ."

"I was half-way through before I saw it wasn't addressed to me, but I had no compunction about going on. It was so obviously *intended* for me. Well? If I challenge her?"

"I wouldn't trust a woman who could play a trick of that kind. I don't know that I'd trust any woman who's fighting to get her husband back . . ."

"She invited me! You know *I* didn't want to go."

"It was all part of the same business. She feels there's some one or something between Dick and her. A ghost, a memory, perhaps even a flesh-and-blood woman. She must get rid of it. I can sympathize with her. She would

say she's never had a square deal with Dick and you needn't expect a square deal from her. Suppose she tries to put a slight on you in public ? ”

“ I can look after myself. She *won't*, though : she's afraid. The great difference between us, my dear, is that I'm absolutely sure of myself because I never pretend to be what I'm not. *She* . . . All the time she's wondering whether she's quite unmistakably an English peeress. Oh, she'll never make a scene ! And, as she's being so kind to me, I must be kind to her by shewing that I'm not a person she need ever apologize for. Once I've done that, we need never meet again.”

“ But what good . . . ?,” I began.

“ You didn't see her little hints about my father,” Flavia returned.

3

If I could not prevent her going, I was able—for what it might be worth—to give her the moral support of my presence. At the last moment one of the Alsters' most eminent guests failed ; and Dick telephoned to ask if I would oblige him by filling the gap. In this way I was unexpectedly privileged to watch the comedy from beginning to end.

At this stage it was only a comedy. I cannot say if any one besides Mrs. Whitman had been encouraged to look on Flavia as a girl who needed—in that august company—to be explained a little ; by the time that a dinner for thirty had merged in a reception for three hundred she had made good her boast that nobody would find it necessary to apologize for her. I should be sorry to guess how many people, after seeing us together, whispered to me : “ Who was that girl with the marvellous hair ? ” ; and, as in her own eyes the triumph would not

have been complete without an acknowledgement of it from her hostess, she balanced the account between them by refusing an invitation to lunch with the latest and greatest of Felicity's patiently collected duchesses on the ground that, as Lady Alster could testify, she had to work all day for her living.

"A bun and a glass of milk at an A.B.C. . . .," she continued on a provocatively proletarian note.

"Then you must come and dine," declared the duchess.

"But I've only this one dress."

"And you look quite enchanting in it. The duke will try to make love to you, but you mustn't mind that. How do I get hold of you?"

I no longer thirsted for revenge when the duchess sent Felicity to find a pencil and Flavia, with a radiant smile, begged her not to trouble.

"You know Dr. McKechnie's number?," she asked.

"Well, the next time you telephone for an appointment . . ."

"Are *you* the lovely voice that answers?," the duchess exclaimed with mounting enthusiasm. "You're his secretary?"

"Oh, nothing as grand as that! I stick the labels on the bottles, you know. If the duke gives you any trouble, just drop me a hint and I'll put something quite disgusting into his next medicine."

Poor Felicity's face was a study in bewilderment. All her social guides must have told her that it was vulgar to "talk shop"; but to suggest that an English duchess could be vulgar was heresy and here was one actually laughing at it!

I see I have said that the account was balanced, but this was only for the moment and it was only for the moment that the comedy remained a comedy. There

was a convention in the less informal years before the war—I go out so little nowadays that I cannot say whether it is still observed—that, when A met B at the house of C, the C’s might legitimately prefer a charge of “poaching” if they were not invited to the first meal at which B was entertained by A. As Flavia may be said to have been launched socially by the Alsters, it was therefore only natural that, when she went for the first time to the houses of their friends, they should be asked to meet their own *protégée*.

And apparently they met her two, three and four times a week, scaling heights even greater. The demands of my night work kept me from following her progress at first hand, but I heard something about it at week-ends and gathered that Felicity must be regretting that she had lived to see the day when she telephoned to ask me the address of my friend Miss Wreyden (whom Richard—apparently—had met after a lapse of years at dinner with me). I must not suggest that stories of Flavia’s wit and wisdom flashed from one end of London to the other or that the bystanders in Hyde Park climbed on chairs to see her pass: she had only a small success in only one corner of a very small social world, but the historical importance of it is that this chanced to be the Alsters’ world. Felicity was spared nothing, not even the thanks of those who had come to know Flavia through her.

Paradoxically, I should say that the comedy ceased to be a comedy at the moment when Flavia forgot her quarrel and set out to enjoy herself in a jaded society that fed on the vitality of others and was always on the look-out for novelty. With her effervescent gaiety, she found herself welcomed, courted and handed on when she had established the beginnings of a reputation for making

bad parties good and good parties better. Bored women gave her dresses ; bored men called for her and took her home ; and on the rare occasions when I met her I seemed to see the room lighting up like a theatre at the awaited entrance of a young and lovely actress. Herself incapable of sustained rancour, she would have laughed if any one had hinted that Felicity might be jealous of her triumph ; and from this it was a short step to forgetting that Felicity had other grounds for jealousy. How could a woman who had achieved the summit of worldly ambition harbour malice against one who was without husband, children, title, position, house or money ?

I did indeed venture on a single remonstrance half-way through the summer, when Flavia asked whether we were to meet the following week in Richmond Terrace. So many people, it seemed, had been enquiring of Felicity when they might hope to see her charming friend Miss Wreyden again that a party was being given for her. Flavia would have been more than human if she had not contrasted this with the party where she had to be explained as some one that the Alsters were befriending, but she refused to believe that Felicity could still wish to annihilate her.

"Then you think it was an honest mistake about the Whitman letter ?," I asked. "And, when she invited us before that, it was an honest overture towards two of Dick's old friends ?"

"No, I think she was out to make trouble," Flavia replied tolerantly. "Now she sees there's no point in it. Dick's not going to kick over the traces ; and any woman who's not absolutely blind could tell her that *I'm* not in love with him. I should think she's sorry now she played that *rather* caddish trick."

Had I been asked my opinion, I must have said that

Felicity in all likelihood only regretted that the trick had failed ; but, even if she was eager to promote a friendship between Dick and Flavia, I should have thought that experience would have shewn Flavia it was impossible. By her own admission, the more she gave Dick, the more he demanded. The air of sullen aloofness which he had worn at the first dinner in Richmond Terrace broke down at the same time as her own air of polite indifference ; and, if she fancied that they could now be “ friends and nothing more ”, she was once again making the common feminine mistake of imagining that a man who is in love can pull himself up as easily as a woman who is not. It is almost needless to say that she made the further mistake of refusing to see that he was in love with her because she did not wish him to be in love with her. ❧

I am conscious of writing petulantly, even twenty years later, for Flavia's foredoomed effort to prove that half a loaf was better than no bread threatened our own friendship. I have no doubt I spoke petulantly at the time. It was incomprehensible to me that she should forget so easily her earlier attempts to make Dick happy in a way that was hers and not his. I thought she was being a little arrogant when she talked of “ handling ” him and “ managing ” Felicity. Most of all, I resented the pretence that she could not leave her mother when she seemed to be leaving her every night and most week-ends.

“ No, I shan't be there,” I said, when she asked again if I was coming to “ Felicity's whitewashing party ”. “ I've seen you and Dick going through all this business once . . . ”

“ That was different,” Flavia interrupted impatiently. “ He wasn't married then . . . ”

“ I should have thought that only made it more dangerous now.”

After this, I heard little of Flavia until the end of the summer. Then, after a short illness, her mother died ; and we all awoke to find ourselves faced with a different set of problems.

4

For the first time in her life Flavia was now free.

At the end of 1912 she was somewhere in the middle twenties—I have never known her exact age, though she was a few years younger than Dick and me— ; she had no relations in the world ; and on her mother's death, thanks to an insurance effected by Roy Hadleigh, she possessed just enough money, if she wished, to keep soul and body together without working. She was free to marry, free to give herself a holiday and free to pay the doctor a visit of indefinite duration while she considered her plans. The letter acknowledging my sympathy was in fact written from his house at Marston ; and she told me that she was staying there at least until McKechnie returned from Scotland, perhaps longer. She had been through a harassing time, she added, and was rather avoiding people, though my parents had urged her to stay at the vicarage when " Uncle Roy " went off on his annual fishing expedition to Norway.

I remember thinking that this was the first time Flavia had been back at Marston since she ran away, on the morrow of Jimmy Wreyden's death, to escape from Dick. I wondered what sentiments and recollections were stirred as she walked by herself in the beech-woods where he had so often implored her to marry him. What later emotions would return to her when she reached the fallen tree where I first kissed her and we sat hand in hand arguing whether it was safe to marry on a twelve-months' contract ?

She was free now, free with about two hundred a year. I wondered whether she would still be staying in the village when Dick came down at the end of the session to inspect the modernization of the "Big House". The more I heard of this reviving friendship, the less I liked it; but its days of danger would be numbered when Dick heard that we were to be married. And, then, as though by thinking of him I had the power of making him materialize, Dick once again walked into my flat, once again murmuring that he always counted on finding me at home on a Saturday and asking if I could give him some dinner.

"Has Felicity been here?," he enquired casually.

As I had only once been honoured by a visit from her, when she came to ask if I knew where and why Dick had suddenly disappeared, the question was a little surprising; but, when I saw him sitting in the very chair that Felicity had once occupied, fidgetting with his hat as she had fidgetted with her muff and using almost her words as, like her, he looked vaguely over my shoulder, it dawned on me that history was in a way repeating itself and that she, for purposes of her own, had now disappeared.

"I didn't even know she was in London," I answered.

"She talked of coming up," Dick yawned. "And she talked of asking your advice. I assured her you wouldn't want to be bothered about something that's purely a matter between her and me. In point of fact, it's not advice she wants, but information. Information on a subject that is really not her business. About a chapter in my life that was over before we ever met . . ."

Though I could not convincingly pretend I did not know what that chapter was, I said with assumed cheerfulness that I should always be delighted to help him or her if they were either of them in any trouble.

"There's no need for any trouble," he replied loftily, "if Felicity will only be reasonable. You remember the night when you and Flavia dined with us? Months ago now? That was really the beginning. I didn't want Flavia asked. After all, when you've been very fond of some one and nothing comes of it and you marry some one else . . . I don't know what Felicity had heard, I shall never know what she hoped to gain by it, but she *insisted*. And I gave in . . . Rather against my better judgement . . . However . . . Well, Flavia was invited once or twice more—I forget if you were there?—*always* by Felicity. The first time I did anything was when Mrs. Wreyden died and I suggested that we should have Flavia to stay. She was all by herself, run down, depressed. Felicity agreed, everything seemed to go quite pleasantly and it was only when Flavia had gone that I was told she couldn't be invited again. Naturally I asked: 'Why not?' 'Because,' said Felicity, 'I don't choose to be humiliated in my own house. I don't know what your relations are, but the way you *behave* . . .' I kept a hold on myself: women are sometimes very hysterical and full of fancies. I just asked her quite politely to be a little more explicit. Then out it came! A lot of nonsense about my having no eyes for any one else when Flavia was in the room, deferring to her as though no one else's opinion was worth hearing . . . I felt that, if she was going to be jealous, it was a pity to have invited Flavia to the house in the first instance."

"I hope you didn't tell her so," I said.

Dick shook his head impatiently:

"I did everything in my power to keep the peace. I said I shouldn't dream of having any one to the house against my wife's wishes; and Flavia wouldn't dream of going where she wasn't wanted. The only conver-

sation I ever directed to her was about my territorial stunt, in which Felicity—whatever she may pretend—is not in the least interested. I told her I should continue to talk about *that* whenever I had the chance. God knows, I don't get *much* encouragement . . . No, don't say anything yet," he begged, as I made some sign of interrupting. "I chose my words quite deliberately and I was perfectly civil. I don't allow any one to dictate what I may discuss and who I may discuss it with . . ."

"Even your own wife?," I ventured to ask. "Even when she shews she's worked up, by dropping hints about your 'relations'?"

"That's what made me say it," Dick answered, thrusting out his always prominent lower jaw. "I don't allow any one to talk about not knowing what my relations are with this or that woman."

As the words had in fact been used and as Felicity had apparently not been felled to the ground, it seemed to me that there was no question of "allowing".

"As you can't prevent it, is it wise to provoke it?," I asked. "And will it do any good to Flavia? If it becomes known—as it certainly will—that you're meeting her in other places because your wife won't invite her to the house and that your wife won't invite her to the house because she thinks you're paying her too much attention . . . I don't pretend to know what the next step will be . . ."

"Oh, I can tell you that," Dick interrupted grimly. "She's ordered me to choose between her and Flavia. Unless I gave her a promise that was an *insult* to Flavia and an *insult* to me, she would walk out of the house. I reminded her that I had never presumed to say what men *she* might meet . . . And, my God, Leslie, if you'd seen *some* of the specimens she's collected! Old admirers

from New York, smirking and flattering; old admirers from France, wondering if there was any chance of an *affaire* as she wouldn't marry them; old admirers from Italy, like monkeys off barrel-organs, lounging round for anything they could pick up. She was miserable if she didn't have her little court, her little notes and books and flowers and 'candy'. Well, fair's fair. She musn't object if I like to talk occasionally to some one who has an independent mind and a point of view."

It seemed that Felicity had objected strongly; and I doubt not she would have objected more strongly still if she had heard this implied contrast between herself and a more intelligent audience.

"And you think she's on her way to London now?," I asked. "To see *me*?"

"She didn't say so definitely; but, when I told her that I wouldn't stand any more of this talk about not knowing what my relations with Flavia were, she said that no doubt you could throw some light on that if you chose. In the meantime she's left Marston . . ."

"And in the meantime Flavia's still down there? And you're still talking about the territorials with her whenever you get the chance? As you're none of you likely to follow my advice . . ."

The grumble, however, might have been saved for another occasion. Within a week I read that the Viscountess Alster had sailed from Southampton on a visit to her father, Mr. Ogden B. Tann, in New York.

5

If Dick was justified in feeling that Felicity would not lightly sacrifice her position as an English peeress and the *châtelaine* of an historic mansion, he had to wait nearly two years—until the world was in flames and he

had cabled to say that he had taken a commission and surrendered Marston Abbas to the War Office—before she came back.

They must have been an unhappy two years for her, as the agony of being publicly and successfully defied by Dick alternated with the torment of wondering what he—no doubt abetted by Flavia—was doing with what she did not fail to call her “ flesh and blood ”. They were an unhappy two years for Dick, who had to suffocate in the smoke of a scandal to which there was no fire attached and they must have been unhappy years for Flavia, since she could look forward to nothing from this competition in stubbornness, either for Dick or herself, whether Felicity came back or remained abroad. She admitted that she had once again misjudged her powers ; she admitted that she had not treated me too well ; but, until she had demonstrated that Dick and she could not be ordered about like refractory children, she had no time to spare for me.

My own feelings are not in any way relevant ; and I need only say that, when war broke out two years later, I welcomed it as a release from conditions that were too much for me. I could not break free from Flavia, I could not make her give Dick up. For two long years, though, we argued and wrangled and parted and came together again with the frenzied bitterness that is only possible with people who are in love.

“ I must see Dick through,” Flavia would tell me grimly.

“ If it’s ‘ seeing him through ’,” I would retort, “ to come between him and Felicity . . . ”

“ I’m not going to be told by *any one* that I’m an unfit person for her husband to meet. Dick wouldn’t waste his time on me if he had the least particle of tenderness

from his wife. Heaven knows, she was keen enough to get him ! ”

“ But can’t you see that you’re simply making things worse ?,” I would ask. “ I don’t *suggest* that you should think of *me*, I know I’ve dropped out . . . ”

“ That’s not *true* !,” Flavia would break in furiously. “ I’m *devoted* to you, but I can’t make you *see* . . . ”

Sooner or later one of us would say something quite unforgivable. We would part for ever and meet again next day, tender, remorseful, whispering passionately that we loved each other too much to quarrel like this. And then one of us would demand in desperation :

“ How’s it going to *end* ? ”

It was a rhetorical question, though I suppose an answer was preparing—even as we talked—in places as far removed as Bosnia and Ulster. I could only see the four of us hurrying with every move nearer to a stalemate. First Flavia, unable to make new plans until Felicity had come to her senses, resumed her work in Wimpole Street and gave up her quarters in Hampstead for a flat which Dr. McKechnie contrived for her over his garage. Then Dick, resolute to shew his complete independence, resumed, by himself, his wife’s political entertaining in Richmond Terrace and at Marston. Then I, unable to influence either of them, abandoned argument for vituperation and merely stiffened their resistance. Finally Mrs. Tann arrived to make terms and was told that there was nothing to discuss until Felicity returned to her husband and children.

I believe there was a convenient assumption for some time that Ogden Tann was ill ; but I felt too sick at heart to care what other people made of the separation and I was thankful that my work in these last months of peace kept me too busy for any more of the maddening and

utterly fruitless exchanges that began: "Until she takes back what she's said about me . . . I must stand by Dick till she drops this nonsense about 'choosing between' us . . ."

Naturally there is no reference to this obstinate, infantile, unworthy quarrel in the official *Life*, which leaves the reader to suppose that Dick was immersed all the time in his territorial work. So, indeed, he was, night and day, to his eyes and over. Whenever we met, he would ask me for news of the Irish trouble, the Balkan trouble, the suffragette trouble, as though he never read a paper; and it was an added unhappiness of these unhappy years that he was beginning to look on his work as a foredoomed failure. No system of voluntary recruiting was going to give him the army of his dream; and, when he made the last of his unheralded appearances in Whitehall Court on the last Saturday before the outbreak of war, he lamented that he had not seen this sooner.

"Another ten years," he told me, "and we should have got what I've been aiming at all this time. The Haldane scheme is good so far as it goes, but you'll never get the whole nation in without compulsion. Is there anything new in Fleet Street?"

"Grey's bursting himself to preserve peace," I said. "He'll have his work cut out."

"Because there's no reason under heaven why any one should listen to him," Dick answered, snatching eagerly at his favourite thesis. "If he could back his arguments with *force* . . . Germany wouldn't dare to bully the whole of Europe if we had a couple of million trained men in addition to our navy."

I felt that this was not the moment for discussing what I learnt at Eton to call "unfulfilled conditions in

CHAPTER THREE

“SERVED, EUROPEAN WAR, 1914-1918 . . .”

I

THE war-chapters in Captain Dutton's *Life of Earl Alster* are some of the fullest and, in the opinion of competent judges, quite the best. Incidentally, they constitute the most exhaustive record of the Dorset Regiment, between 1914 and 1919, that has yet been published; and, if so great particularity is a trifle wearisome to a civilian reader, Dick's son at any rate is in a position to reconstruct the details of every action in which his father was “mentioned” or wounded or, simply and uneventfully, engaged. Is there anything to add?

I have been wondering what I should add to my own record, if I were honoured with a place in *Who's Who* and if I felt that the bald entry “*Served European War . . .*” did less than justice to the effect of that tremendous ordeal on my life and mind. Even twenty years later, every experience is still so vivid that I should hardly be content with the statement that the second territorial battalion captured this sector or was driven out of that: I should want to know something about the emotions of the barristers and schoolmasters, yes, and of the journalists, who helped to make up the battalion. And yet the personal point of view has been so often—and so well—presented that any competent novelist, though he was a child at the time, could draw an entirely convincing picture of the man—there were hundreds of us!—who left Fleet Street for the army in 1914 and

returned from the army to Fleet Street in 1919. And I, though it is my own story, could add nothing to it. Is the same true of Dick?

I think not. To him the war was not merely—as with most of us—a violent change in daily habit, not merely the end of an historical epoch, not merely a furnace from which young men—if they emerged at all—emerged with their youth and elasticity and hope all more or less gone. It was the end of life itself. His experience must have been almost unique in that, while other men accepted war as an adventure or an unavoidable necessity, he had himself rejected it as an impossibility ten years earlier. When he told me that, for all the good he had done, he might have remained in the Guards, I felt that I knew at last for certain why he had left; when he growled that, if he had succeeded in getting a colony to govern, he would now be out of all this, I saw that the retreat which he had prepared to avoid fighting was suddenly proving a short cut into the thick of it. Various old phrases took on a new significance: “But *my* army will never be *engaged*! That’s the whole *point*! I know too much about war . . . If I thought my scheme would make it more *common* . . .”

In other words, as I half-suspected when he gave up soldiering for politics, Dick was running away. Would he come back now that his gamble had failed? I have said that for some weeks I lost sight of him, but I received scraps of news at intervals from Flavia in these days when he was waiting for the War Office to decide what he must do. At the beginning, when we talked about peace by Christmas, I saw no chance of getting out myself; on the other hand, whether he liked it or not, I saw less than no chance of Dick’s remaining at home. And this was the view of his old brother-officers, now

hastening to rejoin. It was the view of John and Philip, who were all for "squashing this territorial nonsense" and putting a soldier in charge of recruiting. It was the view of my parents, who for some unaccountable reason wished to see Dick raising a troop or squadron or regiment of yeomanry and going out at the head of "Alster's Horse".

Only Flavia ventured the opinion that he was better employed where he was; and, when I said that any one could now carry on his work, she replied that she was trying to save him and the men under his command from inevitable catastrophe.

"He's *not* cut out for this sort of thing," she continued angrily.

"Then I don't envy him his present job," I replied. "Urging other men to do something he's afraid to do himself."

My application for a commission had that day been addressed to him as honorary colonel and chairman of the selection board, though I still hardly expected to get out.

"I didn't say he was afraid," Flavia corrected me. "I've never said that, in *your* sense."

"You've very often said that he always begins by running away."

"And he always forces himself to come back! That's what I'm dreading now. Perhaps when Felicity arrives . . . *She* won't want to risk losing him. All the same, it *worries* me."

I suggested that this was really not necessary. Dick knew himself as well as any one. If he decided that he would be useless in the field, he had a perfect excuse for remaining at home; and at this stage of the war it was not yet taken for granted that every fit man

between eighteen and forty must necessarily be under arms.

"The War Office has told him to sit tight . . .," I went on.

"And he'll very soon get round that, if he wants to," Flavia sighed. "Or if he feels he *ought* to want to. '*What would my father and grandfather think?*' If he feels he's hurting himself *inside* . . .," she ended in a phrase that I had not heard since I was a boy.

"Then *nobody* can help him," I said. "I shall see you again before you leave London?"

"If you're still here. I suppose any time now . . . For both of us . . ."

2

The day on which I received my orders to report at the depot of the Dorset Regiment was the day on which Flavia joined her unit. She came to bid me good-bye; and to my surprise she brought Dick with her, apologizing with a certain cold anger for wasting my last hours in London, but asking with dangerous amiability whether I could make him see what he could not see for himself and what she was apparently incapable of making him see.

"He thinks he knows better than a man like Lord Kitchener," she threw out in continuation of an argument in which both seemed to have lost their tempers.

"I say there are some things every man must decide for himself," Dick replied with an air of having discovered a phrase and being resolved to repeat it till opposition was worn down.

He was in uniform and looked very martial as he threw out his chest and tugged at his moustache.

"Not in the army, not during a war!", Flavia returned, also with a manner of repetition. She was herself in

uniform now, but I have seldom seen two people who gave me less idea of discipline. They stormed up and down the room in which I was trying to pack; they talked at the same time; they contradicted each other; and at short intervals I thought they would box each other's ears. "A fine sort of soldier *you* are," she jeered, "if you think you can decide for yourself what orders you'll obey! And you were in the *Guards*!"

"If I had any idea what this was all about . . .," I began, as my own patience began to wear thin.

"He wants to throw up his present work, because it isn't spectacular enough," said Flavia. "When the War Office is off its *head*, trying to fit the *right* men into the *right* places . . ."

"Exactly! My job can be done by any dug-out with one arm and one eye," Dick snapped. "When we're clamouring for *young* men, young *women* too . . ."

"Whose first duty is to do what they're *told*! Well, I've said my say and it'll serve you right if you're properly *snubbed*. I wanted to go out with a motor-ambulance, it may interest you to know. Instead of that, I'm being stuck down at the base. Probably I shall be kept to rolling bandages and sterilizing instruments. We have to do what we're *told*."

As they continued to rail at each other, I returned to my packing with a sense of mild wonder that two people of ordinary intelligence should waste their time on deceptions so transparent. Obviously Flavia was fighting to keep Dick at home by any and every means; obviously, by any and every means, he was bent on getting out. She believed that he was temperamentally unfitted for active service, but she took refuge in talk about "discipline". Dick in his turn talked about the part that young and middle-aged and old men should be playing; but he did

not explain how it came about that he was no longer “in the hands of the War Office”, as at our last meeting. The truth, as all three of us knew, was that he had run away and come back; none of us would say why he had come back, but I think we could all guess.

And I have certain revealing phrases to support my guesses. “*The latest to apply for a commission in our show here is Leslie! Somehow I’d never pictured him as a leader of men . . .*” Did Dick, as he wrote this, pause to reflect that he was at least no less a leader of men than half the candidates he was passing? A day or two later, in describing a village-to-village recruiting-canvass, he wrote: “*It’s been such a success that very soon there will only be old men and boys on the estate. Already the women are beginning to take the place of their husbands and sons and fathers. It’s magnificent, of course, but it makes me rather unhappy to see quite elderly mothers of families toiling in the fields while a great hulking fellow like me drives about in a fat car, denuding the countryside of its men.*” For a time, no doubt, Flavia had been able to still these uncomfortable stirrings of conscience by reminding him that he was only carrying out the orders of Whitehall; but a new factor was introduced when she herself appeared in Red Cross uniform and it dawned upon him that he was allowing a woman to face dangers from which his own “hulking” person was sheltered.

I imagine that the phrase about those things which every man must decide for himself was first heard when Dick called at the little flat over Dr. McKechnie’s garage to find Flavia equipped and packed, her identification-disc in place, one arm a little tender from a typhoid inoculation, calmly waiting for orders to report with her unit. I had undergone something of the same shock myself when I discovered that she was acting while I

dawdled in Fleet Street, discussing with my editor whether I could be spared.

I have said that they were wrangling when they came to Whitehall Court ; I left them wrangling when I went to catch my train. It was a strange leave-taking for three people who might never see one another again ; but I felt at the time that two of them were saying : "*If I don't gain my point, why, we shan't meet again.*" Flavia was convinced that Dick's nerve would break under fire ; and, if—as a man—I can enter into his feelings, he was saying :

"Suppose her hospital's bombarded ! . . . If she were killed when I skulked at home, filling up forms . . . Bad enough to see women bringing in the harvest because I've taken their men from them, but if I let them fight for me . . ."

"A plague on both of you !," I muttered, as my train bore me through the late-summer afternoon to the squalid wilderness of hutments that was to be my home for the rest of the year ; and I wondered whether I should ever get within reach of Flavia again so long as Dick was alive.

"Perhaps we shall all be dead, though," I said, "before this business is finished. That will certainly be one way out of the difficulty."

And this is really all that I have to say about the war-chapter in Dick's life. The only thing that separated him from the average of infantry officers who joined at this time is the mental evolution through which he passed before resigning a safe and dignified position. He did not break down, he did not throw away any more men than the rest of us ; and, as the official record states, he ended with two wound-stripes, several "mentions" and a D.S.O. to his credit.

It was all very much as I had expected ; and so I told Flavia at our one meeting four years later, when it was a question of days before the first peace-overtures were received.

3

It was the end of October or the beginning of November, 1918, when Dick had come back wounded for the second time.

I had been home at the average intervals, but my leave had never coincided with Flavia's ; and, though we exchanged very stale news through my parents and Roy Hadleigh, neither of us knew that the other was in England until we met by chance in the street. At once I made her promise to dine and come to a *revue* with me. She asked after Dick ; and I told her that I had been visiting him in his hospital. She said that she would call if I would give her his address. And then, as though something had snapped inside both of us at the same moment, we began to babble at each other almost hysterically :

"My *dear*, this is luck ! I thought I was never going to see you again ! How *are* you ? I want to hear all that's been happening to you ! Well, it's pretty well over now ! "

When we met again at dinner, I at once began to make plans for the rest of our leave.

"To-morrow you're going to lunch with me," I said, "and we'll go to another show . . ."

"I'll do anything you like in the evening," she answered, "but I've promised to visit Dick in the afternoon."

"Well . . . I suppose I mustn't try to upset that, though I swear I have a better claim on you. After all, I'm going back at the end of the week, but Dick's out of

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it for good with that knee of his. Luckily for him. Remember the last time we three were together? It feels as if it had happened to other people! You were trying to keep him in England . . ."

"I didn't succeed," Flavia interrupted. "But we surely aren't going to talk about the war, are we?"

"God, no! I only wanted to tell you that the catastrophe you prophesied didn't materialize. I never thought it would. Dick's sometimes difficult to bring up to scratch, but once he's there . . . And it wouldn't have done, you know, for any one in his position . . ."

"I still wish he'd been governing Madras or Bombay all these years," said Flavia. "However . . ."

"He couldn't possibly have kept his recruiting job," I said, "which was what you wanted. A man of thirty-two, physically fit, an ex-officer of the Guards . . ."

By now, as I am afraid my tone shewed, men whose nerves were snapping under the strain of three or four years' fighting had little charity to spare for those of their own age who dug themselves into comfort and security behind the lines.

"And yet," Flavia reminded me, "you yourself said that he would have a perfectly good excuse . . ."

"But, when you've said 'excuse', you've said everything. I know men who argued quite cynically: '*This is a filthy job; and, whatever any one else does, I'm going to keep out of it*', but that wasn't in Dick's make-up . . ."

"I still think," Flavia persisted, "that, if I'd had more time, I could have induced him to stay. '*Orders are orders. Kitchener must know best.*' That sort of thing. It was all such a frantic rush."

Though I was solely responsible for turning the conversation into this channel, I felt tempted to say that it was rather a waste of time to be talking like this now.

Dick had survived, with a couple of trifling wounds; and he was out of it, whereas Flavia was going back in two days' time and I at the end of the week. As so often, however, when once his name had been introduced, we seemed unable to dismiss it.

"What did you think of him," she asked me now, "when you saw him in hospital?"

"He was in extraordinarily good form," I said. "I'd never heard him giving imitations before. His one of the matron . . ."

"To me it was all . . ." Flavia hesitated in search of a word and then added almost in a whisper: "Quite ghastly!"

"But, good heavens, *why*?"

"It would have been so much better if he'd been killed!"

I led the way in to dinner, too much surprised to say anything. Once more, as in old days, Flavia and I did not seem to be talking about the same person. If Dick had been gassed or blinded, she could not have put him out of his misery more decisively.

"Frankly," I said at last, "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean. Just conceivably he may have a stiff knee, but the doctors don't think so . . ."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about his *body*! Can't you see that everything *else* is dead? But I don't want to talk about it. We can't do anything, so let's enjoy ourselves. After all these years we've deserved a little fun."

So adjured, I abandoned myself to what stands out in my memory as the most completely wretched evening of my life. For a moment I felt an almost irresistible impulse to cry out indignantly: "*Of course, everything's dead! That's true of us all!*"; but it was still a point of honour to keep up the tradition that "the spirit of the

armies"—officers, non-commissioned officers and men—was "wonderful". Every itinerant journalist and politician told us so. Every old woman in trousers told every old woman in petticoats so. My father wrote to tell me so at a moment when officers, non-commissioned officers and men were stampeding. And of course we handed the flattering tale back when we came on leave. One would have become suspect as a "defeatist", otherwise.

I resisted the temptation and set myself to make Flavia drunk and to get drunk myself. At the time I should not have admitted this in so many words; but I told myself that, as a cocktail and a bottle of champagne did not seem to be raising our spirits, we had better have a second bottle and some liqueurs. By the end of dinner we may have been flushed, but we were as drearily sober as at the beginning; and, far from forgetting Dick, I could only wonder whether Flavia's calm final judgement on him applied equally to me. I was desperately tired and very much on edge; my face, when for the first time in months I saw myself completely clean at the Turkish bath, was lined and my hair grizzled at the temples; but had anything happened to my main-spring?

"Dead", I kept whispering to myself and tried to imagine how we must all look to any one who had not seen us since we left that other life behind in the distant summer of 1914. My fingers, I noticed, were yellow from perpetual cigarettes; and I had a chronic cough from the same cause. I drank about twice as much now as before the war; and it had about a quarter of the effect. Sexual fastidiousness had left me at the same time as an inborn distaste for foul language. I had long ceased to read or write or think; and my one concern was to get through the day's job in the day. In a sense, certainly, our old, civilized selves were dead.

"We shall feel a bit different," I prophesied at the end of dinner, "when we've had two or three months' unbroken *sleep*. I think the noise and the dirt, when you're no longer a boy . . ."

"Will you go back to the *Morning Standard*?" asked Flavia with a gallant effort to seem interested.

"If they want me. At the moment I feel too stale for anything more exalted than posting letters and emptying waste-paper baskets. You, too?"

"A bit! At the hospitals, though, we shan't be allowed to rest when the war finishes. There are so many people permanently smashed . . ."

"And such arrears to make up everywhere. With several million pairs of hands the fewer. It should be a great opportunity for any one who's any good at general-post. If he plays his cards well, Dick might get a job now from the coalition."

"I should think he would rather settle down quietly at Marston," Flavia replied. "You seemed rather startled," she continued with her characteristic inability to shirk, "when I told you he was all dead inside, but . . . Well . . . It was too much for any man: to fight the Germans *and* himself."

At the risk of disloyalty to the tradition of our "wonderful spirit", I asked Flavia if she thought Dick was the only man who had felt an impulse to scream or lie down or run away. She must have heard rumours of firing-parties; she must know that by now there had been mutinies in most of the armies engaged.

"Yes, but all of you have only had four years of it," she answered. "Dick's been at it all his life. More than thirty. Ever since his first nurse told him that soldiers' sons didn't cry. Well, he's out of it now," she continued with a sigh. "Let's hope Felicity won't worry him."

He'll be wax in her hands now. Or any one else's. I wouldn't take on his *dreams* for something . . .," she ended with a shudder, as we left the restaurant.

4

It was the most completely wretched evening of my life because I had built such hopes on it and because my nerves were too near breaking, like a feverish child's, to bear with the disappointment of finding Flavia somewhat farther from me than when I was in Flanders and she on a hospital-ship in the Mediterranean.

At first sight, this may appear to be quite irrelevant to a study of Richard Croyle, third Viscount Alster, who was lying all the time in Lady Tantallon's hospital in Belgrave Square ; but I believe it is vital to the understanding of his life. As I undressed that night, I contrasted the evening as it had turned out with the evening that I had promised myself when I met Flavia in the street and she exclaimed with shining eyes : " You ? Oh, my dear, I must kiss you ! And I don't care who sees us ! Oh, but this is marvellous ! " It was to have been so very marvellous ; and in fact we had spent our time discussing in what sense Dick was alive or dead. Dick, always Dick ! I came near to hating him at that moment, but very soon I was too much interested to have any personal feelings. Why was it " always Dick " ? What was the secret of his queer, unpremeditated faculty of getting himself into the middle of the stage ?

Let me say at once that I cannot answer my own question. At most I can say that this quality, however it should be analysed, was what inspired me to begin this book ; but I suspect I shall come to the end without analysing it to my satisfaction. All his life, Dick seemed to be receiving more attention than he deserved. I

venture the explanation that no one could ever decide what his deserts were. One argued about him, only to find that one's opponent was apparently arguing about some one quite different. His biographer presents one picture, I another; and I believe it was this internal disharmony that kept us arguing about him and that brought Flavia back again and again when she and I and Dick himself must have known that she could do no good. It was in 1912 that she became a free woman: six years ago. "And six years from now?" I asked myself and fell asleep trying to recall Browning's lines about the fascination of incongruity. The "tender murderer", was it? And the "superstitious atheist"? With some kind of "demirep" who loved and saved her soul in new French books?

We did not meet again, Flavia and I, until hostilities were at an end and she had been brought over to one of the big general hospitals in South London. I was demobilized late; but, even so, I was back in England before my flat was restored to me by the elderly admiral to whom it had been let and for several weeks I had to inflict myself on Dick in Richmond Terrace. He wrote that I must excuse the absence of a hostess, as Felicity was still required at Marston; and I reconciled myself to a bachelor party the more readily for having no idea of the terms on which the two had been living in their rare moments together since she returned from America in 1914.

Certainly I had no cause to complain of his bachelor welcome. Dick was watching through a window as my taxi drove up; he plied me with refreshment before I was well inside the hall; and, as a pleasant surprise, he announced that Flavia was dining that night.

"You can tell your old shell-back not to be in any

hurry about turning out," he went on. "Considering the years I stayed with you, I think it's time you paid me a serious visit."

I thanked him and asked how soon he expected to have Marston handed back to him. When he apologized for his wife's absence in the country, I could not help remembering the apologies which he had offered for her prolonged absence in America ; and, when he told me that Flavia was dining, I recalled certain bitter and barren exchanges in which I warned him that each new invitation was setting Felicity farther from him and he retorted with an out-thrust underlip that he must be allowed to choose his own friends.

"Well, we're not taking any fresh cases," he answered. "I've been down there, trying to wind things up, ever since I was discharged."

So the unavowed separation, which the war had suspended, was not being renewed.

"I suppose the War Office has made a ghastly mess of the place," I said, as Dick led me into his study and gave me a glass of sherry.

"Well, a couple of months will do wonders," he answered. "Assuming one can get the workmen . . . I only wish we could have done more ! I feel rather a cad for leaving Felicity now, but the whole business of wards and sisters and men in blue overalls . . . I don't want to hear where some poor devil lost an arm, I want to forget all about it. So does Felicity, I should think. I contemplate taking her abroad for a bit."

As I watched and listened, I wondered whether Flavia would still maintain that our friend was "dead inside". He seemed to me more natural and untroubled than I had ever known him. There was indeed an echo of his father when he regretted how little they had done—old

Lord Alster would certainly have said it was nothing to have three sons and one son-in-law fighting or to make over two houses to the government—, but for once he did not seem to be worried by what was "expected" of him. Why, indeed, should he? He had done the utmost that any one could require; and he was entitled to a little ease. I wished I could imitate him, but I had my living to earn.

"Have you decided where you'll go?," I asked, as Dick—standing up to replenish my glass—gave my shoulder an unexpected pat and murmured with almost embarrassing cordiality that he was "devilish glad" to have me there.

"New York," he answered. "You know, I've not yet been to visit my in-laws on their native Long Island. First of all Felicity was having her babies, then the war came . . ."

It would have been tactless to point out that for two years before the war he might have paid his respects to the Tanns and then brought his wife back with him. I presumed that he was now going, at her orders, to be shewn off; and who could blame her? I was glad to see that Dick was submitting with so good a grace.

"What happens afterwards?," I asked. "Are you keeping on in politics?"

"That's rather hard to say," he answered, "till we know what politics are going to be like. If we unfortunate peers were allowed to choose which house we'd sit in . . . Felicity and I have been talking once more of work *outside*. . . . Well, I'm several years older now; and the children would be at school for a good part of the time . . . It seems quite clear to me that I can't, at my age, just sit in a chair and cultivate a paunch."

It is chiefly on account of this last phrase—and the

tone in which it was uttered—that I have set down a conversation that must otherwise seem intolerably trivial. I want to present Dick as he appeared to me that morning in early spring as we sat on either side of the fire, smoking and sipping sherry. There was nothing of a haunted man about my host, nothing of a watch with a broken main-spring. If he seemed undecided about the future, who in 1919 was not? Though he filled his clothes better than before he went into hospital, I saw no sign of the threatened “paunch”; and, when he stood up in practical protest against sitting any longer in a chair, I heard again a faint echo of his father’s voice.

Dead inside? In all essentials, this was the old Dick who for twenty years and more had talked to me about life in the army and life in the House of Commons. If I saw a change, it was for the better in that he did not take himself quite so seriously. He looked well, with bright eyes and a better colour than when he was on active service; and, though I dared not ask questions, I felt that he had in some way adjusted himself: to Felicity, to the world after the war, perhaps even to Flavia. Was he feeling, with me, that the spectre of an international conflict—with Russia, with France, with Germany—had been laid for the first time since we were children and laid for ever?

I thought he seemed not only at ease, but happy; and he was touchingly glad to see me. When I went upstairs to write a note, he insisted on accompanying me; he remained in my room while I changed my clothes; and, when we strolled down again, he caught my arm with an odd gasp of dismay and exclaimed:

“By the way, I’m taking it for *granted* you’re lunching here! You are? Good! Only the two of us. If we had

a cocktail, you might be able to support the strain a bit better."

5

As he rang for the tray, I remembered that I had still to enquire after his brothers.

"John is with the army of occupation," he answered. "Philip, as you probably know, was invalided out. And Margaret lost her husband at Jutland, which is ancient history now. Tell me what you think of this," he went on, handing me a cocktail.

The summary disposal of his relations rather suggested that he was saying: "*Now you've done your duty and I've done mine!*" I could sympathize a little: in these first weeks of demobilization we seemed to spend half our time asking in whispers whether this friend or that was still alive. And Dick, more than most of the men who had told me they were going to take a holiday before settling down, seemed hospitably determined that I should not even think of the war while I was his guest. At this moment he was studying the *Entertainments* column in *The Times*; and, when I told him that I was reporting at the *Morning Standard* office next day, he answered that he would not let me out of the house unless I promised to apply for at least a month's leave.

"And, if you're wise, you'll chuck the damned rag," he added. "Felicity's tremendously keen on having all our family papers properly edited. Now, if you'd do *that*? You could have a set of rooms to yourself at Marston . . ."

"And, if I took orders," I said, "you could present me to the living when my father gives up."

"That's certainly worth considering. A dividend?"

He waved the cocktail-shaker in my direction, but I had not cared sufficiently for my first experience of

his art to desire any more and luncheon was still three-quarters of an hour ahead of us. I have mentioned that in the army I acquired the habit of drinking about twice as much as before. It did not seem to have any effect ; I hope it did no injury to my constitution ; but I recognized that, if I was returning to a sedentary occupation, I must drop the practice of taking odd whiskies-and-sodas, odd appetizers and liqueurs, odd glasses of the sweet and muddy fluid that passed as port in these years.

That first day in Richmond Terrace I came to think that it would do Dick no harm to follow my example. He put three cocktails that would have knocked most men out of time on top of at least two glasses of fairly strong sherry. At luncheon he consumed five-sixths of a bottle of hock, to celebrate the fact that we were no longer at war with Germany. The brandy in which we toasted our gallant allies was left at his elbow when the servants went out of the room ; and he had a whiskey-and-soda later because he found tea indigestible.

If I cannot say that on him too it had no effect, I can say that the only effect was to make him more mellow ; and, as I used the word to myself, I wondered if the new cordiality which I had noticed on my arrival had been inspired by a morning draught. Was the colour in his cheeks the result of air or alcohol ? At all times Dick was a shy man, even with his few friends ; and he may well have felt that the task of entertaining me single-handed would strain his sociability. His trick of following me about from room to room argued an excess of conscientiousness ; and his plans for taking me to a different place of amusement each night sounded a little feverish.

" You really mustn't bother about me," I told him in the course of the late afternoon when I said I was going for a walk and he at once insisted that he must come too.

"Give me a latch-key, let me come and go . . . I shall have an enlarged liver, if I don't take some exercise."

"That particular organ never worries me," he answered, as he mixed himself a second whiskey-and-soda. "Still, for the sake of our appetites . . ."

As we walked along the Embankment, he renewed his strange suggestion that I should settle at Marston as his private chronicler. I had not treated him seriously the first time and I did not treat him seriously now until he asked if I remembered the room at Marston called "the librarian's chamber". It was next, he said, to his own present quarters; and it would be great fun if he could drift in for a pipe and a drink when the family had gone to bed. I suddenly remembered that he had used the same phrase that morning in shewing me that his dressing-room communicated with my bedroom. I was still, he supposed, a night-bird and I should probably find him calling on me for a pipe and a drink if he saw a light under my door. I decided that Dick had become a bad sleeper or else disliked his own company at night.

Did it matter which? I recognized even at the time that I was being euphemistic and that Major Lord Alster D.S.O. was afraid of the dark. Flavia, when last I saw her, had said something about not envying him his dreams; and I could not see that it mattered whether he had a nightmare whenever he went to sleep or whether, like the man in Kipling's tale of horror, he kept himself awake for fear of his dreams. There was an explanation now of the way he had followed me, from the moment when I saw him watching for my taxi to the moment when he attached himself to me for this walk. Perhaps there was now an explanation of the odd drinks that he seemed to be taking more often than could be good for any man's health.

"I'll think it over, Dick," I promised, "but I doubt if it would be practicable. Yes, I'm still a night-bird. After ten years of leader-writing you couldn't expect much else . . ."

I was giving him an excuse for coming to see me, if he could not sleep, but I was trying even more to make him sleep by letting him know that I was at hand. In fact, though he kept me up till all hours, he never disturbed me when once he had said good-night; and I came to wish that I could find an equally effective form of reassuring "suggestion" to cure his idea that he always needed something to brace him. This first evening, when we returned from our walk, the sherry decanter had already reappeared in the smoking-room; and, when I came down to dinner, Dick was once more compounding his unpleasant cocktail of almost undiluted gin and lemon-peel. I suppose I belong to a hypocritical generation, between the Georgians and the neo-Georgians, which thinks it a vice to drink excessively and a greater vice to have one's vice known. I wondered if any one else had noticed Dick's changed habits when Flavia, in shaking hands with me, looked over her shoulder to say:

"Don't make one for me, my dear!"

"You on the water-waggon?," he asked.

"Oh, no! A glass of wine now and then . . . I don't think I could have carried on these last few years," she continued, "if I hadn't been given a little Dutch courage occasionally. That's all over now, though. I don't need it. And when you *feel* like that . . . Don't you agree, Leslie? Or are you one of these people who can't exist without a cigarette in one hand and a tumbler in the other?"

I said that I was not: I preferred a pipe and was beginning to feel bloated if I drank between meals. Dick

did not seem to hear either the slightly censorious question or my pacific answer ; but, as Flavia thanked me with her eyes, I knew that I was not the only person to observe our host's new conviviality.

While I was chiefly puzzled, though, she was obviously worried ; and, when she whispered that she was so glad I had come to keep Dick company till Felicity could join him, I wondered whether she was thinking of a young doctor who had served in one of the Afghan wars and had found the strain too great for his nerves and had come back with a daily need for something that made him feel adequate to his daily task. Dr. Wreyden also had been wounded ; he had been mentioned in despatches ; and he could not bear to talk about his service. I am inclined to think now that, if he had ever got into *Who's Who*, the mere record of his campaigns and the recital of his decorations would not tell the whole story. I am inclined to think, further, that the most provocative passage in all Captain Dutton's two volumes is the one that begins : "*For Lord Alster the war really ended in October, 1918, when he came back wounded for the second time . . .*" Had the war really ended for him in March or April, whenever it was, 1919 ? Would it ever end ?

"I want to have a good talk with you," said Flavia, as we went in to dinner. "Not *now*, of course ! And not *here*, at any time. But as soon as ever we can arrange it."

CHAPTER FOUR

“ A MEMBER OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON
CURRENCY REFORM . . . ”

I

IN the summer of 1919, when the Versailles treaty was signed, Dick Alster was thirty-seven and had been married a little more than eleven years. Of his adult life, since he left the Guards, eight years had been spent in the House of Commons, two—more vaguely—in the House of Lords and at Marston Abbas and four on active service. If a man's prime is from forty to fifty, he was therefore set free, some three years before reaching it, to complete his education in public affairs. And Captain Dutton, in the official *Life*, devotes several rather dreary pages to enumerating the duties which Dick undertook during the next ten or twelve years in the process of fitting himself to be a proconsul.

When first I read them, I blushed to think that my egregious “ appreciation ” had been responsible for all this misleading nonsense. “ *With the coming of peace,* ” says our author, “ *Lord Alster began to look for a new sphere of usefulness.* ” In 1919 he was a man with much still to learn ; he was also largely an unknown man, with prestige still to acquire. The commissions of which he was a member supplied experience and a reputation. Well, possibly they did ; but nowhere it is suggested that Dick never wanted to be a governor-general, or that he was eventually pushed into it by force of circumstances. And yet I at least heard no hint of vaulting ambition,

though I was staying with the Alsters until a month before they sailed for New York.

I made an attempt to go when I heard that the hospital at Marston was closing, but my flat had to be redecorated before I could return to it and Felicity warned me that, if I left her house the moment she entered it, she must put her own interpretation on my departure. I was forced, therefore, into a position from which I could not help seeing in the greatest particularity the terms on which my host and hostess were living and Dick's alleged efforts to discover new worlds to conquer. I can sum my observations up in the short phrase that he devoted himself, heart and soul, to giving his wife "a good time" after her four years' immolation in hospital: to that and nothing else.

Whether any specific conditions had been conceded or imposed, when Felicity came back, I was never told. Flavia shunned the house after her one dinner there; but I was to hear later that she and Dick met clandestinely elsewhere. He seemed to have forgotten his scornful dictum that the life of "society" was beneath the dignity of a proper man and now vied with his wife in filling Richmond Terrace with the politicians and soldiers and industrialists and "mystery men" left behind by the war; but it may be argued that he had nothing else to do. He was not wanted in the House of Lords, not wanted in Dorsetshire, not wanted anywhere in a country given over to perpetual peace and a perpetual trade-boom. What, then, was there to do but to enjoy oneself? When I left for my office in these weeks, Dick was always hurrying through an early dinner before taking Felicity to a play; and two mornings out of five I was greeted on my return by the sound of rag-time from a drawing-room that was now kept permanently cleared of its furniture and by

the sight of a buffet-supper on long trestle-tables in the hall.

When we were by ourselves, he would talk, with a hint of apology, about giving Felicity her "fling", but no great acumen was required for seeing that this kind of life did not satisfy her. The guests were in general undistinguished, which was bad ; and, which was worse, they were sometimes rowdy. Dick was therefore doing little to gild her social position and might even be imperilling it if he won her a reputation for bohemianism. At the same time, they were superficially more in accord than at any time since their marriage ; and I told myself that, if a man and woman had not achieved sympathy after ten years, it was something to have attained a state of indifference. My impressions of this rather feverish chapter can really be concentrated in a single moment of a single night, when I paused at the open drawing-room door on my way up to bed. Dick was no more uproarious than the rest and he was obviously more sober than many ; but he was flushed and full, I suspected he would be fuller and more flushed before the night was out. As I watched, Felicity stood for a moment without a partner ; and he hurried across to claim her. They danced till the music stopped, then called for an *encore* and danced again till some one else cut in. Dick waited for the first note of the next tune and then slipped downstairs to the buffet, from which he subsequently emerged with a manner of increased benevolence. It was something, I repeat, that they had become indifferent to each other, but I did not like Dick's method of arriving at indifference.

"Have you ever thought of going round the world ?," I asked him one day when he was telling me of a house that his father-in-law had built at Pasadena. "When you've got as far as California . . ."

"I don't think I could stand being cooped up in a ship all that time," he answered.

"You might make a tour of the empire," I said. "There are so few men in either House who can speak on imperial subjects with first-hand knowledge . . ."

"And you know my *love* of speaking!", Dick interrupted with a laugh.

"The experience would be useful. And you admit you'll have to find *something* to do with yourself. If you were known to be a man who had visited all our dominions and colonies . . . You have a sort of vested interest in India . . ."

"I do so hate colonials," the embryonic Governor-General answered with a yawn.

2

Was it a yawn begotten of late hours, or boredom, or the late hours that boredom induced, or the boredom that late hours left in their train? Assuredly it was not the yawn of one who had exhausted himself in the business of preparing for any new "sphere of usefulness".

Flavia, who was still working at her hospital in south London, wrote anxiously to say that we must give Dick, directly or by persuasion of Felicity, a new interest in life; but I felt obliged to tell her that I had failed by myself and that any attack by Felicity would endanger the superficial peace which now reigned in Richmond Terrace. Already, I said, Dick was giving everything but the love that was not his to give; and she did seem at last to have discovered that an unwanted wife cannot make herself wanted by bullying. Why, he would ask, should he affect ambitions for her sake? What more could she fairly demand? If she could not have him at her feet, she had him trotting at her heels; if she could not win

his heart, she had won his hand and name and title ; if her coldly exquisite body left his senses untroubled, at least he was not neglecting her for another woman ; and Felicity, who regarded physical attraction as a bait to be dangled ever so slightly out of reach, was the last person that I should credit with unsatisfied desires.

The longer I lived under their roof, the less I felt inclined to interfere with a relationship that seemed to be balancing on a needle-point. I believe Dick would have fallen in with anything that Felicity proposed. At a time when he would have run a mile to avoid correcting a servant or reproving a child—anything to keep his nerves tranquil—she could have sent him back into politics or settled him peacefully at Marston or carried him off for a fishing expedition in New Zealand. They were both several years older—for a disastrous moment I believed that they were several years wiser—than in the days when Felicity was looking for a successful rival to demolish and Dick asserted his “elementary right” to choose his own friends, but I felt that I should antagonize both if they were made to think that any outside influence was at work. If Felicity consulted me, I would give her as much advice as I thought prudent ; but she might say with justice that Dick’s friends and relations had not made such a success of his life that they were entitled to volunteer it.

And so we lived and made conversation, avoiding all issues of the slightest interest and importance, until the last night of my visit, when I went into the drawing-room before dinner to thank Felicity for putting up with me so long. I felt, perhaps wrongly, that she must be glad to see the last of some one whom she always regarded as being in league with Dick against her, but she roused herself to unwonted cordiality and said that she hoped to

see more, *much* more of me on their return from America. Dick did so enjoy talking to me ; and he had so few real friends, in spite of the motley crowd that had been making night hideous for so much of my time as their guest. I asked how long they would be away, but Felicity did not know. I asked what they would do when they came back, but again she did not know. What should I advise ? The world was in such an incomprehensible muddle. . . .

When Dick drifted downstairs, murmuring something about a "spot of sherry", I took advantage of Felicity's appeal for advice to say that he should be encouraged to look for a job ; with dubious jocularly I added that he was getting fat and out of condition.

"You mean he needs something to keep him out of the pubs ?," she drawled with her incomparable knack of sounding equally unnatural whether she was aping the style of a great lady or the modish inelegance of a shop-girl.

"I should think that's hardly necessary," I said, refusing to treat her words literally. "He's not a good enough 'mixer' to go down in that kind of society. At the same time, he's too young and much too able to mess about in the House of Lords or a miserable estate-office. I was inciting him the other day to undertake a tour of the dominions . . ."

"A long sea-voyage ?," she murmured.

This was so necessary an ingredient of the tour that for a moment I did not understand why she mentioned it. Then, as she muttered something about "cutting it right out", I realized that she was quoting a favourite prescription of doctors with tippling patients and that the change in Dick's habits had not escaped her notice.

My reply was a long and rambling speech only held

together by its own extreme disingenuousness. It is bad enough to agree with any woman that her husband is drinking too much, but it is a hundred times worse if one's words are liable to be warped by the heat of domestic altercation into some such form as : "*Your best friends say you're never sober nowadays.*" I told Felicity that never since he was an undergraduate had I seen Dick the worse for liquor. If he enjoyed good wine, he also enjoyed good food ; and with his big frame and his passion for hard exercise he could put away more of both than most men. With a flank attack on America, where "ocean-wide" prohibition had lately become the law of the land, I said that she, like many of her countrymen, hardly conceived of a middle course between abstinence and intemperance. Having no drinkable wine, Americans subsisted on cocktails and whiskey, which they consumed with furtiveness or bravado ; they had never been educated to look on wine as the civilized man's accompaniment to a civilized meal.

In addition to being disingenuous, I fear I must have been offensive ; but Felicity heard me out patiently and at the end only observed with a shrug :

"He never *used* to be like this. If you and his Egeria led him astray when he was a grass-widower . . ."

This was the first time that she had ever mentioned her long separation from Dick, but I felt that she could not have forgotten it for a moment, waking or sleeping, and that some one would have to pay for it somehow, some time.

"My shoulders are broad," I said, "but I can't accept responsibility for something that's entirely due to the war. If we've all increased our ration, it's because we got into the way of it out there. And we must get out of the way of it here. Which is easy enough when you have work to

do. I've very often thought," I continued in a cumbrous attempt to turn the conversation, "that the best way to avoid another war would be by agreeing to prohibit alcohol during hostilities. A Geneva convention, like the one that forbids you to poison wells. Frankly, I don't believe people would fight a modern war on water."

Again Felicity heard me to the end, but she was not to be lured from the subject of Dick.

"Whoever or whatever is responsible," she pressed me, "you admit there *is* something . . . ?"

"What's the good of denying it?," I broke in, though I had in effect denied it as long as I could. "He *is* doing himself very well indeed. I decline point-blank to become solemn about the business, though. When he's found a job that calls for all his powers, a job that will enable him to *forget* . . ."

"That he married me? "

I ought, I suppose, to have remembered that an egoist of Felicity's breed could not hear that a comet had been observed without concluding that it had appeared in her honour, or to spite her, or to give her an opportunity of reacting to comets in a different way from other people's; but I could only think of Dick following me that first day from room to room—anything to avoid being left alone!—, keeping his courage up with surreptitious nips and filling the house with noisy young people who gave him no chance of thinking.

"He wants to forget the war," I said. "We all do. It was a dirty, tiring, unromantic experience . . ."

"He could have stayed in England if he'd wanted to," said Felicity in a tone of resentment that made me feel she had asked him to stay and he had refused.

"With his name and position? No!," I answered.

"And I take my hat off to him. It required more courage,

of the cold-blooded variety that is so much more rare than the berserk rage that wins most of the V.C's . . ."

I stopped at a scornful little laugh that seemed to invite pity on my extreme credulity.

"He was *spoiling* for it!", Felicity cried. "A war's the only thing a Croyle *lives* for! Ever since we married he never talked of anything but his precious 'nation in arms'. And now my little Richard makes my blood run cold by grumbling that he was out of this, asking if I think the *next* war will come before he is too old. The *next* war, if you please!", she repeated with real emotion. "They're all the same! John and Philip . . ."

If I had felt that I could trust her, I would have told Felicity that she must make an exception of Dick. By "trust" I do not mean that I considered even the possibility of her betraying a confidence—by my simple-minded standards of decency that seemed unthinkable—, but I could not be sure she would understand, I rather doubted if she would even listen. Her interest in Dick was limited to the way in which his position flattered her vanity or his habits threatened her ambition. She had never tried to disentangle his mind; she was not concerned with his sickness of spirit.

"I can't speak for the others," I said, "but being with Dick for so long, I formed the impression that he disliked the whole business more than most people. You've probably noticed that he won't even talk of it now . . ."

Felicity's raised eyebrows expressed mild wonder that I did not follow his example. No one, surely, talked about the war now: it was not done. And when one was alone with a beautiful woman? Though for once the three of us were to dine by ourselves, she was dressed as if she expected to entertain kings. Slave-bangles had lately come into fashion; and she was sliding a dozen of them up

and down one white and scented arm. From the crown of her neat black head to the sole of her shapely green shoe, she was made for admiration ; and I felt, while I tried to explain poor Dick, that she was wondering only whether I admired her and, if not, why not. Always, to the exclusion of all else, she seemed to be wondering why Dick did not admire her as he should.

" If he disliked it as much as you say," she observed, " I can't imagine why he was so keen to get back. The first time he was wounded . . . "

" That was all part of the tradition he'd been bred to. When they gave him his D.S.O., I felt they ought to have added a bar to it for the effort he had to make just to keep up the same show as other men. You see, *he* had some idea of what it would be like. It was part of your father-in-law's scheme to have him ' blooded ' in spirit as soon as he could walk ; he was brought up on war in all its foulness. The effect . . . Well, the effect was to make Dick say privately, what we all say now at the top of our voices, that it's a quite unendurably disgusting business. . . . A man of sensibility can't go through what Dick went through . . . When I said he wanted to *forget* . . . That's why he must be found a man's work . . . To stop him from brooding . . . "

" But he *revelled* in it !," Felicity broke in. " Every letter . . . It didn't matter that other men were being blown to pieces all round him. Dick doesn't know the *meaning* of fear ! "

3

My one effort with her was evidently to be no more successful than my earlier effort with Dick. When I am told of a man who does not know the meaning of fear, I cease to argue : one or two of this kind I have met and

they were always men who did not fear barbed wire or mud or a point on a road where the German guns had got the range. If she had eyes for anything but admiration on a male face, Felicity must have seen that the bravest of her patients at Marston knew only too well the meaning of fear. I hoped, without much confidence, that I had sown good seed ; and there I left her to work out her own understanding with a husband who had been presented to her for the first time as a man of sensibility. I never imagined that I had been scattering dragon's teeth in soil that was calling out for them.

Is this to confess that my own imagination was sluggish ? I hardly think so. I hardly think that the most experienced psychologist would have foreseen how Felicity would respond to my appeal ; and I only blame myself for failing to see one quality in her generally simple composition. Though I never pretended to be fond of Felicity, I thought that I understood her and I even sympathized with her in the disappointments and humiliations that made up her married life. Here was a young and beautiful girl who had been sought in marriage by half a hundred men ; and Dick reluctantly consented to throw in his lot with hers because they both seemed to be at a loose end. Here was an exquisitely seductive woman, exquisitely bedizened and bejewelled to whom—as wife or mistress—half a thousand men would have crawled on their bare knees ; and Dick became aware of her when she asked him for children. Here was an heiress, far from insensible of the power that money gave her ; and, when she threatened to leave him, he let her go and remain gone till she came to her senses. I knew all this. I felt profoundly sorry for her. And I might have felt sorrier still if I had known that, in addition, she stood in moral and physical dread of him.

There was no point at which she could pierce the massive armour of his indifference ! And this it was that I had missed. I believe that in the early days of her career as a political hostess she had a wholly innocent flirtation with an *attaché* at one of the embassies. If she hoped to stir Dick's jealousy, she had misjudged her man. At first he ignored her challenge ; then he commented tolerantly on “Felicity's queer taste for dagoes” ; only as a general proposition did he let fall that he would divorce his wife out of hand if he ever caught her playing the fool. And it was Felicity who came to heel.

If I am to blame, it is for unwittingly giving her the idea that she need no longer fear a man who was himself afraid of his own shadow. She might at last meet him on an equality. Perhaps she might even hope for something better than equality. If Dick had a vulnerable spot, he might learn that other people had vulnerable spots. That is the most innocuous formula that I can find for the thoughts that I chose to put in Felicity's mind, as she began to see in Dick a man who might after all be brought to her feet. I admit at once that I was not present to watch her pointing out his errors. When the Holy Office flourished, it would have been unnecessary to stand by the rack in order to guess that persuasion had been applied to the gasping wretch who returned to make confession in open court. One is entitled to presume somewhat and to judge by results.

The result of Felicity's persuasion became visible in a variety of ways before I ever thought to associate them with her. I find it difficult, indeed, to fix any date for the beginning of a change that seemed, at every other meeting, to be no change at all. For one or two rather dreadful weeks Dick seemed to have taken seriously to drink, for a week or two afterwards he became a teetotaller ; he

tried once more to make Flavia run away with him and then he told her that they must never meet again ; he was a beachcomber one day and a weighty member of a royal commission the next. Of all this the official record says next to nothing ; and what it does say is wrong. At the end of his disintegration period, Dick may have undertaken his innumerable committees because Felicity scolded him into it or because he felt he must pull himself together or because he was fit for nothing else, assuredly not because he was methodically training himself for a higher destiny ; and about the time and manner of his disintegration it is even less easy to write with certainty.

The first intimation that something was now grievously amiss came to me one Saturday night in the summer of 1919 when Flavia invited herself to dine in Whitehall Court. Though we had exchanged letters once or twice, the serious talk which we had promised ourselves at our last meeting had still to take place ; and she came avowedly to hear about the weeks that I had spent in Richmond Terrace.

" Dick tells me they're going to New York in the autumn," she threw out.

" You've seen him ?," I asked.

" We met in the street the other day. It was *nominally* by accident. I've made clear that we can't begin the old business over again. Leslie, I wish we could find him some work to do ! "

" I wish he shewed the least indication of wanting it," I answered with rather resentful memories of the night-club life that had kept me awake in Richmond Terrace.

" Doesn't Felicity *see* . . . ? "

" I'm afraid she does. And very soon other people will see it too. She hasn't much imagination, though. It was a new idea that any Croyle could think of war as anything

but a glorious picnic. I *hope* the New York visit will stop the present drift for both of them."

Flavia asked sardonically whether Dick was being taken to be shewn off or to be rescued from temptation.

"If I'm the trouble," she added, "it would pay her to hand me a ticket and so much a month to stay abroad. After all, I'm only one; and they're four, if they take the children. Or if you and I disappeared to some place like Nigeria . . . Why don't you write out your resignation, apply for a special licence . . . ?"

"And set up as a remittance-man? We should have to insist on a guaranteed income from Felicity; and that might look rather like blackmail. It's a pity the old *Standard* can't start a Nigerian edition. As I can't carry the paper about with me, I'm afraid life might be a bit precarious."

"Then I suppose I must go alone," said Flavia. "Do you know at all what it costs to live there?"

"I'll try to find out," I promised. "Has anything out of the way happened to necessitate this rather drastic step?"

Flavia shrugged her white shoulders and reproached me, smilingly, for not seeing when she was in earnest. Then the smile faded; and she turned away, speaking between her teeth as I remembered her speaking in childhood:

"I suppose the day dawns when you face facts and know yourself for the first time. I can't pretend Dick won't try to see me as long as I'm in the same *continent*. And, while he does, there'll be no peace with Felicity. Before the war, it was different. She wasn't being any *more* silly . . . If it *is* silliness: perhaps *we* were the fools for not seeing her as she is . . . But Dick could stand up to her then. *Now* . . ."

"But I gather you're *not* meeting him except by accident?"

"And *I* know that I can't slam the door in his face when he's at the end of his endurance. Call it weakness, say I'm not being fair to Felicity: that's *me* and I must make it physically impossible for us to meet. Dick, too, is facing facts at last . . ."

I could not refrain from saying that this seemed to be preeminently what he was not doing.

"He sees that they *can't* go on with this armed neutrality," Flavia rejoined. "For the children's sake, for their own. He's been trying to clear away all the old misunderstandings. This psychoanalysis stunt of talking out all the things you've kept bottled up . . . I don't know how much Felicity contributed, but Dick swears he laid himself bare in a way he's only done with Uncle Roy and me."

So my last talk with Felicity had not been wholly barren. I felt rather ashamed of myself for saying so often that she thought only of the admiration and homage that she regarded as her due.

"Why d'you talk about the end of Dick's endurance?," I asked.

"Because it stares you in the face. You've not seen him for the last few weeks, have you? I can't tell you the *reason*: he won't tell *me* that. Perhaps it's the effort of suddenly knocking off . . . *you* know . . . *I* felt . . . I felt he was facing the fact that Felicity doesn't *want* a reconciliation. Except on her own terms, whatever they are. He was terribly depressed when he came to see me. And he knows himself well enough by now to be quite sure he'll go on coming whenever he feels down and out. I daresay Felicity has faced that now. And she knows herself well enough to be quite certain she could never put up with it. A sort of breaking-point all round. I feel that unless something drastic *is* done . . . That's

my reason for talking about Nigeria. I'm rather hazy where Nigeria *is*. If you can think of a better place . . ."

4

Yes, I feel sure this was the first time that I heard anything about what I have called Dick's "disintegration"; and, as Flavia said little more than that he was low-spirited and near the end of his tether, I did not regard this as the first stage in any kind of revolutionary change. The next time I lunched in Richmond Terrace, I noticed indeed that Dick was drinking barley-water; I also noticed that he was rather silent and morose, but it was a tiresome party and Felicity, whom I have already described as being more royalist than the king in the political prejudices of her adopted country, was now being somewhat more violent than the fire-eaters who had talked about hanging the Kaiser. If I remember rightly, poison-gas was to be turned on those who had invented and first used it; and the daughters of those German officers who had contrived the Belgian atrocities were to be subjected to public, exemplary raping. It was enough to make any one ill-tempered; and I should have given the house a wide berth for some time if Dick had not begged me to come back next day.

"John's lunching. He's dying to see you again," he told me, though I had never been at all intimate with either of Dick's brothers since we were children together.

On the occasion of this second party Dick was still drinking barley-water, but he was no longer silent. The luncheon indeed nearly ended in a stand-up fight between the two brothers over the Antwerp landing or the Mesopotamian expedition, I have forgotten which. As neither of them had taken part in either campaign, I could not

understand why the discussion of dead and forgotten strategy should generate so much heat until John, walking away from the house with me afterwards, muttered that, if old Dick imagined he could make a whipping-boy of him, he was very much mistaken.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," I said.

"Then you weren't watching," John returned. "I'm sorry for the blighter, but he had no excuse for insulting *me*. If he wants to tell people they're talking through their hats, he'd better begin with Felicity, who is without exception the damndest fool I've ever encountered! 'You ought to have gone on to Berlin. If you win the war and then throw away the peace . . .' My God, if her perishing country had come in three years earlier, she'd have some right to talk. If the peace has been thrown away, it's because that jackass Wilson landed us with his comic league-of-nations covenant which his own people repudiate. Felicity talks as though America had made a lovely new world and the rest of us had messed it up out of sheer stupidity. Poor old Dick, who hates talking about the war anyway, can't gag the woman, so he bears it as long as he can and then lets fly at some one else. I suppose, if I'd been a Christian, I should have encouraged him to go on blowing off steam . . ."

I lunched again a few days later; and on this occasion there was no similar scene to record. I do not remember that Felicity was any less inept than usual—indeed I fancy she initiated a faintly sadistic discussion on the torturing of prisoners—, but Dick listened tolerantly—if he listened at all—and did not attempt to relieve his feelings at any one else's expense. I fancy he was too full of drink to say much, perhaps to hear much; but he was courteous to his guests, charming to his wife and only an object of horror to one who suddenly grasped

that he could only cope with the first and endure the second when he was one remove from insensibility.

I was so much shocked by this exhibition that, though I had more than once imperilled my friendship with Flavia by urging her not to interfere in other people's business, I now invited her to dine with me and roundly asked if she could not use her influence with Dick to make him take a hold on himself.

"I *did* try," she answered with the listlessness of complete exhaustion. "And he *did* give it up for a time . . ."

"I know," I assented ruefully. "It made him rather like a bear with a sore head . . ."

"If he weren't so healthy, he might be feeling the consequences and wondering if it was worth it. As it is, he only wonders if it's worth keeping sober to hear Felicity nagging or making a fool of herself. I don't quite know what the answer to that is."

I asked if no one could reach him through his self-respect, which in one form or another I regarded as the toughest strain in his character. At present I doubt if more than three people had ever noticed anything amiss ; but in time his powers of assimilation would weaken. Any one who stayed with him, instead of merely seeing him at a meal where perhaps others were helping themselves generously, would be struck by the rapidity with which one drink succeeded another. His children would observe subtle differences between Dick and other fathers.

"He would only ask what there was to keep up his self-respect for," Flavia replied in a tone of flat hopelessness that I had never before heard her use. "You see, he has nothing to look forward to. I suppose, if the king made him Viceroy of India and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, he'd buckle to as he did in the war. If I said

I'd run away with him . . . I suppose, if I approached Felicity . . . After all, we both want to help him."

I did not believe that Flavia would achieve anything by a course that, in truth, I did not expect her to adopt. The idea of her meeting Felicity to discuss how they, the rivals for Dick's affection, could unite to save him seemed to me, if not melodramatic, at least too literary: it was the stuff for a telling scene in a play, a moving chapter in a novel, but not a thing that I could well imagine happening within five minutes' walk of my flat, in the year 1919, between people that I knew.

Flavia, to be sure, had never lacked courage; and I have no doubt she needed it all for the hour-long battle of which she wrote to tell me a few days later. For a moment, as I began to read her letter, I did think that her courage had failed her, for she had promised to call on leaving Richmond Terrace and to describe her interview by word of mouth. I saw I was wrong, however, when I reached the postscript: "*This is the whole story. I will come and see you, if you like, but I hope you won't ask me to. I am desperately tired and I should probably cry. Besides, it would do no good.*"

5

After all these years I am still unable to think of that letter calmly; and I make no attempt to remain calm when I think of the interview that, for all its length, it described so sketchily.

"*My mistake,*" Flavia wrote with ironical moderation, "*was in thinking we both loved Dick. Felicity doesn't, in any shape or form. She only loves herself. She doesn't want to punish him or hurt me, but she has to get her due. If you can imagine the stony indifference of an inquisitor . . .*"

I could indeed imagine it. I could imagine the whole

scene. I could hear Felicity at the telephone before it began, her voice changing from artificial graciousness to artificial frigidity when she grasped who wanted to see her: "*Miss Who? Oh, Miss Wreyden . . . Well, I am very busy, but as you say it's urgent . . . You couldn't write? Well, I shall be at home about six . . .*" I could see her setting the drawing-room as she had set it once before on the night when she insisted, against every one's wishes, on meeting this girl who, absent or present, always contrived to stand between her husband and herself. I could picture her dressing with more than usual care, powdering a trifle more heavily than her wont if she thought her cheeks were a little flushed, perhaps deciding to cover her glossy black hair with a hat if she suspected that her liquid brown eyes were too bright with triumph. I felt sure that she had kept Flavia waiting.

"*If you can imagine . . .*"

I could imagine the stiff little bow of that erect little body, which always looked as if it would snap in two when she bent. I could feel the cold silence in which Flavia was left to explain why she had called, what business of hers it was to offer advice or even to affect concern on behalf of some one else's husband. I could see her gallantly persevering, stubbornly refusing to be provoked. And, at the end, I could hear Felicity protesting with a shrug that she unhappily had no influence over Dick.

"*She told me she'd tried and failed,*" Flavia wrote. "*She'd always known Dick was really in love with me; and, after his father died, she tried to end an impossible condition—for him, for herself, for the children—by getting him abroad. I, for reasons of my own, had put my spoke in that. She never had been, she never would be, able to do anything with him when he came at my whistle and so long*

as I chose to whistle. Some people might think this an humiliating confession to make, but she had got far beyond thinking of her own dignity—God forgive her the lie!—and was only concerned to save ‘Richard’ from further degradation or, if that was impossible, to protect the children. Influence? Perhaps, if I left him alone . . . She had gone away before the war, in the hope of rousing him to some sense of decency, but she had soon discovered that she was only handing him over to me. No doubt, if she tried to get him abroad now before he went entirely to pieces, I should put my spoke in again. Conceivably, if I went right away . . .”

As though to anticipate a comment from me, the letter jumped on for half-an-hour to the moment when Flavia—still uncommitted, apparently—left the house and found Dick waiting in a doorway.

“ . . . a pitiable state. He told me he’d come to say good-bye. It would all begin again if he found me in London when he came back from America. He wanted me to go because of the way that fiend was tormenting him. When he was drunk, he didn’t mind, but he couldn’t always be drunk. . . . I told you there was something going on that I didn’t understand: I now know what it was. That time when he was trying to talk away their differences, he’d stripped himself to the bone: things that he’s never told even to me, things that I’ve told you and you wouldn’t believe. She was incredibly sympathetic, he says, outwardly: leading him on . . . and filling him up. He was so drunk at the end that he couldn’t speak; but she knew all she wanted now, the devil incarnate! She’d brought him down, as she thought: he’d never be able to make another stand against her. She taunts him, like that boy who taunted him for hiding because he was afraid to fight in South Africa. And he hasn’t the heart to strike her

over the mouth. When she's tired of the rack, she takes to the thumb-screw and talks—in front of him—of things that still keep him awake at night, horrible, unmentionable things that happened in the heat of the fighting. And he knew she'd go on tormenting him till he gave me up absolutely."

So, Flavia continued, she was going away.

"And it won't do," she continued, "for me just to disappear again to Hampstead. If you were free to choose where you lived . . . But it's no use thinking about that."

The words that followed had been scored out ; and the three lines of black obliteration imposed a check. Though there was more to come, I could not read it for the moment. I understood at last why Flavia had written when she had more than half-promised to come and see me. Apparently she was unequal to a third scene, a second parting, in one afternoon ; and she was parting from me as finally as she had parted from Dick.

To the postscript a frantic and hardly legible second postscript had been added :

"My dearest, I can trust you not to look for me. It was such agony when I had to hide from Dick ; and I really don't feel I can stand much more. Forgive me !"

I sat staring at the letter till my servant came in to lay the table for dinner. I was still staring at it when the telephone rang and my editor asked if there was anything the matter with me. I cannot remember what excuse I made for my lateness, but I remember rising automatically, driving automatically to my office, receiving my instructions and retiring to write the most automatic leading-article that ever found its way into the columns of a paper generally esteemed for the sprightliness of its style.

At some stage in that long night I found myself gripping

the telephone and being told by the operator that he could get no answer. I believe I was trying to say that, if Flavia would wait a day, I would come abroad with her, though we had to beg our bread. At some other stage, though she fancied she could "trust" me not to look for her, I went round to her flat and found a newspaper sticking out of her letter-box and a messenger-boy ineffectually rattling the knocker. Evidently she was taking no risks; and I returned home to find a note from Dick, bidding me good-bye before he sailed to America.

"Sorry not to have seen you again," he wrote, "but I've been very busy and rather seedy. However, I'm in hopes that the voyage will buck me up."

I wondered. Would anything or any one help Dick now? Was he too far gone? To wrench my thoughts away from Flavia, I tried to imagine what kind of career Felicity would contrive for him. She could make him, perhaps, sit on committees and preside over commissions. At the end of ten years, when he had gained a reputation for uninspired industry and dull soundness, he might be given something really worth having, provided always that he had not blown out his brains in the interval and that nobody else wanted it and that the fountain of honour did not ask whether he was not still, or had not once been, addicted to tippling.

I doubted, though, whether she would push him far. The man was finished. If at the time I had been acquainted with Captain Dutton's wholly unjustified and misleading phrase, I should have said there was no further "sphere of usefulness" for him to explore.

And then I could banish Flavia no longer. She was gone, for ever; and she would haunt me, for ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

"AND CHAIRMAN OF VARIOUS SELECT COMMITTEES . . ."

I

WHEN I admitted to the editor-in-chief of the *Morning Standard* that I had known Dick Alster all my life, I added that for a time we had drifted apart, but that, even when we were seeing least of each other, we met regularly at certain club dinners, from which he always came back for a final smoke and talk in the Ryder Street rooms that I had taken—though I did not tell the editor my reason—when I found the flat in Whitehall Court too richly charged with memories of Flavia.

These would be, roughly, the years from 1920, when Dick came back from America, to 1924, when he consulted me about that year's general election. One coalition government, one conservative government, three prime ministers and twice that number of colonial and dominion secretaries had by this time clearly demonstrated that they had no other use for his services than as a member of some commission that would sit for six months, take evidence and make recommendations to which no one but a jaded pressman ever paid the slightest attention. The labour party, on the other hand, had more patronage than applicants for it.

I promised to help in making Dick's name known ; and, as I could not bring myself to meet Felicity until I was compelled, our intercourse dwindled to an uneasy hour's conversation once every six months or so, when I found him lingering like a friendless dog at the end of a

public dinner. Even if I had been able to forget or to forgive Flavia's last interview with Felicity or her parting from Dick in some doorway off Richmond Terrace, I had my own sufficient work to occupy me, my own decisions to take, my own troubles to overcome. It was in these years that both my parents died—within a week of each other—and I found myself free, if I liked, to bid journalism a long farewell ; it was also in these years that the *Morning Standard* changed hands and I elected, for reasons at which I have hinted, to take service under the new proprietor.

It was in these years, finally, that I became forty and discovered, as I found myself looking back, that I had slipped from youth to middle age. When I stayed with Roy Hadleigh for my father's funeral, the old doctor asked why I did not employ my now comfortable means in travelling and I told him, in almost the words that Dick had used four years earlier, that I could not stand being cooped up in a ship, that I disliked meeting new people and did not want to see new places, in sum that any change from my Ryder Street rooms and the New Century Club must be a change for the worse.

"The perfect old bachelor," commented Hadleigh, who by now had slipped from middle to old age, though his vigour of mind and body was unimpaired.

"Not of malice aforethought," I said, "as you know better than most people. I've had flirtations and friendships and affairs with a number of women, but none of them satisfied me. If you can't give the whole of yourself . . ."

"Did you ever want to ?"

"To the others ? No ! Some of them were amusing, some of them were exceedingly attractive. All the time, though, I knew that if Flavia came into the room . . ."

As I broke off, the doctor pulled a letter from his pocket and studied the post-mark.

"Bangkok's in Siam, isn't it?," he asked.

"The capital," I answered. "Is that where she is now?"

"Apparently. She went out to Ceylon in attendance on an invalid and has been wandering farther east ever since. Sometimes nursing, sometimes . . . I'm glad I had her trained to a profession, but I never guessed how the poor child would need it. She talks about going to Cambodia next . . ."

As he restored the letter to his pocket and looked at me over his spectacles, I asked if he was suggesting that I should join her.

"I'm telling you how to find her if you want her," he answered. "I don't yet know how much in earnest you were . . ."

"And I can't tell you," I interrupted a little bitterly. "It *seemed* the only thing that mattered; but, when she asked me to come away with her, I could only think of ways and means, which I suppose your romantic lover should scorn. Flavia? Whenever I asked her to marry me and let every one else go hang, she was always held back by her ghastly sense of responsibility. Love, it appears, is *not* the only thing: the people who count the world well lost for it are probably rather selfish hogs and the decent people, if they make other people unhappy, won't count the world well lost. I expect that sounds a disgustingly unromantic, middle-aged line . . ."

"No, I think you've taken the measure of Flavia's foot."

"I'd go out to her," I admitted candidly, "if I thought she wanted me."

"She's always wanted you," the doctor murmured.

"Not to the exclusion of everything else! We'd got into the fatal habit of being in love and getting no farther."

Until something happened to break that. . . . She may tire of her wandering, tire of being alone . . ."

"I wish to God she would!", exclaimed Hadleigh. "You may be middle-aged, friend Leslie, but I can count on my fingers the years that I can expect to live."

This conversation belongs to the first months of 1923; and it was in the autumn that, as I have narrated, Dick consulted me about the prospects of a labour victory at the general election and the possibility, as he expressed it, of there being "more martyrs than Ramsay's lions can conveniently tackle". We continued to discuss appointments and offices for several years and for several years I talked about retiring from Fleet Street; but in truth I believe we were both too listless to desire a change and it is certain that we neither of us found a propitious moment. It was in these years, between 1924 and 1929, that we had the general strike; in these years that unemployment changed from an abnormal consequence of temporary economic maladjustment to the normal and constant accompaniment of a standing economic misconception; in these years that the evil seeds of the peace-treaties began to bear fruit and that a bemused world was confronted with new problems of war-debts and reparations and international exchange and currency-manipulation. At the time it seemed like a series of new crises, no more to be shirked than the late war. Dick would murmur: "One damned thing after another" and bury his greying head in the evidence of his latest committee. "It keeps you from thinking," was his ambiguous comment on his own labours. I continued to "tide" Bunting "over" yet one more "transition".

For what it may be worth, it was towards the end of these later years that Flavia married. I use the qualifying phrase, because I find it almost impossible to separate

what was vitally important to me from what was now of perhaps little importance to Dick ; and it is with Dick's life that I am concerned. At the time, when I could eliminate my own feelings, I felt disposed to say on his behalf, as Talleyrand said of Napoleon's death : "*Ce n'est pas un événement, c'est une nouvelle.*" It was ten years now since Flavia cried in despair that, so long as she was in the same continent, Dick would not consent to be entirely separated ; her betrothal to an officer whom she had nursed in the war and who was now taking her to his rubber estate in Malaya could not add anything of finality.

2

Would Dick now cease even to brood over might-have-beens ? Would he devote himself to his wife and almost grown-up children ? Would he stir himself to secure the work that he was always half-heartedly urging other people to secure for him ?

These were a few of many questions that Hadleigh put when he sent me a marked copy of the *Morning Post* with a note to say he hoped I should not "*take this too hard*".

"*I know nothing of this fellow Helston,*" he continued, "*so I can't tell if he'll make our dear Flavia happy, but I'm glad for every one's sake that there's to be no more shilly-shallying. Frankly, I should have liked it better if she had married you, but perhaps you were right in saying she needed something decisive to subordinate her other loyalties to the main one. Any way, though there's no fool like an old fool, I'm not fool enough to think I understand what influences men and women in their affairs of the heart. I only hope this announcement has put an end to Dick's day-dreaming. Is he ever going to wake up ?*"

It was not an easy question to answer. As host or guest at this time, as husband or father, as hereditary

legislator or county magnate, Dick did all that was required of him, much as a well-trained animal performs its tricks without understanding them ; but I felt all the time that he was in a trance. Dick at a regimental dinner, Dick at the Fourth of June celebrations, Dick at his wife's birthday-party ; he never made a wrong movement, but he was never alive. What, I wondered, did Felicity think of her victory, now formally and officially proclaimed ? Was she satisfied ?

Was Delilah satisfied when she asserted herself successfully against Samson and beheld him shorn, bound, spent and useless ? I never had speech with any one who met Dick during his one visit to New York ; but, if Felicity was comforted by being able to produce a well-broken husband at last, she cannot have been much gratified by the expression that her friends' faces wore as they looked at her slow-speaking, half-dazed " English lord ". And more than twenty years of marriage, for ten of which her empire had been undisputed, really left her very much where she had been in 1908 when she gave her beauty and her wealth in exchange for Dick's position and the prospect of his title. She would not have been Felicity if she had not dreamed of a day when her son should boast a courtesy title and her daughter be known at Court as " the Lady Beatrice Croyle ".

Would this dream now become a reality ? I felt that the doctor was better placed than any one to answer his own question, for Dick was living more and more in the country and it was only when I stayed with Hadleigh for a week-end that I had an opportunity of studying the chequered pilgrimage that led ultimately to the Antipodes. At one time I thought that Dick might have disliked a house in which he had passed a far from happy childhood ; but, when I found him sauntering by himself

under the pictures in the Long Gallery or furtively rearranging the spoils of five generations in the museum, he seemed to have wholly forgotten the days when he stood trembling to attention for general inspection by a father lately returned from his last war. I remembered Flavia's declaration that of the two, opposing Dicks one was always wishing that he had been his own grandfather, serving in the Mutiny. And, when I met him with a dog and gun or viewed him distantly casting a fly over his tiny trout-stream or joined him in the beech-woods that he was clearing and replanting, I came to feel—perhaps fancifully—that he was giving to the trees and stones of his estate a dumb love for which he had all his life been denied outlet.

Only a cynic would have suggested that on the wind-swept chalk-downs and in the tangled woods and by the serpentine banks of his little stream he was safe from Felicity, who never risked her elegant shoes beyond the terraces and lawns of the formal garden ; but one needed not to be called a cynic for suggesting that his growing taste for solitude consorted ill with his assiduously advertised desire for important public work. As one appointment after another fell vacant, I tried to stir his interest ; but after a punctual outburst against the futility of his latest royal commission he became remote and absent-minded, murmuring that he must talk this over, yes, he must certainly talk this over with his wife. Occasionally I wondered if he was beginning to drink again ; but his new detachment was different from the smiling, fuddled self-sufficiency of the bad old days in Richmond Terrace. I was puzzled ; and one night, when I was staying with Hadleigh, I asked if he had noticed a change in Dick.

"I should be a good deal happier if I had," he answered darkly.

"This habit of going off by himself all day . . .," I said.

"I should be a good deal happier if I thought he *was* by himself," said the doctor. "No, it's not a woman of flesh and blood that he meets on his rambles, but I believe she's vastly more real to him than his wife and daughter. And that sort of thing is not good for any man. It's very strange, Leslie: you'd have thought time and distance . . ."

"I don't think I should have," I interrupted, trying not to look at the glass screen behind which I had so often seen Flavia at work with her bottles. "However, it's a subject I would rather not discuss."

"Did I hear a note of rancour then?"

"Not against Flavia, God knows!," I answered. "I feel we all behaved as we must inevitably have behaved, by the essentials of our characters. If I could persuade myself that *anybody* had got any good out of the muddle . . . I suppose this fellow Helston has."

"That," said the doctor, "is just what I want to discuss with you. I won't probe any more wounds than I can help, but there are certain storms blowing up and we must be ready for them, I can do my bit, but you'll have to do yours. After all, I'm an old man, living on a back-water. You're in the great world, you know everybody, you can pull strings and get things done . . ."

I asked if he was trying to tell me that Helston was dead and that I must get Dick out of the way before Flavia returned to England.

"It would be a great deal easier for every one if he were," the doctor replied, "but I'm afraid Helston's not going to die—people *don't*, except in books!—to suit your convenience or mine. Oh, if you could marry her, it would be simplicity itself. You've long said that she

needed something *decisive* to happen. It seems to have happened . . . now that it's too late."

•
3

Though Hadleigh always staged his confidential interviews in the surgery to secure himself from interruption, the importance of the present one could be judged by his added precaution of switching the telephone through to the hall.

It could be judged also by his difficulty in expressing himself. From the first I begged him to speak with complete candour; but he would only reply with disconcerting helplessness that he had nothing definite to tell me. I asked what form my help was to take; and he answered that he did not know. It was the only time that I had seen him entirely at a loss; and, as he filled his pipe and rang for the grog-tray and turned the key in the door, I felt that he was indeed an old man, to be no longer able to set his thoughts in order.

"The trouble . . .," he would begin. "I'm not blaming any one . . . If I knew this fellow Helston personally, it would be so much easier . . ." And then, in an obvious attempt to gain time by digressing into a generalization: "It's always a mistake for a man or woman to marry when the other says: 'I'm not in love with you.' Ardent youngsters think they can set a woman on fire . . . Witness Dick! Vain girls won't believe that a man can hold out against them. Witness Felicity!"

"It's a further mistake," I suggested, "if you don't care enough to marry a man, to imagine you can have an intimate friendship with him."

After more than twenty years I still remembered with resentment the doctor's impatient recommendation that

Flavia should see if she cared enough for Dick to become his mistress. I still did not know whether she had or not ; I no longer cared ; but I traced all our troubles to the years in which no one tried to check her belief that she could manage him as no woman had ever yet managed any man.

" Helston must be a fool !," the doctor broke out angrily. " With that woman for a wife . . . I think Flavia's the most selfless creature I've known . . ."

" It was her undoing," I said. " If she'd thought more of herself and less of other people . . . Other people who were mutually exclusive . . ." Of a sudden I remembered a figure that she had employed after her father's death. " When you jump overboard between *two* people . . ."

" She paid you the compliment of thinking you could save yourself. Dick ? Never ! The more she tried, the more she would simply sap his manhood. When you understand that, you'll be more sorry for her. It wasn't any feminine vacillation. If *I* had to break off in the middle of an operation because I found it was hopeless . . . To see all the agony beginning again as the anæsthetic wears off . . ."

" Oh, Flavia never got anything but misery out of the whole business !," I exclaimed. " I hoped, though, that *now* . . ."

The doctor hunted through a pile of letters and extracted a small packet of photographs. One was of a bungalow surrounded on three sides by vast tropical trees of a kind unknown to me ; another was of a man, with his face completely hidden by the shade of a sun-helmet, sitting at the wheel of an elderly Ford car ; yet another was of a smiling native group.

" She was perfectly frank," he informed me, " in

telling Helston he would be taking her at his own risk. She didn't *want* him, she didn't even want a home, she only wanted to keep away from England. Not a sound beginning, you know, though of course she hoped to make him happy. I suppose Helston thought it would come right when once they were married. And, however cold she remained, she would be a companion in that god-forsaken planter's shack. Better than a native girl. There, if I judge him aright, he made his mistake. I have no experience of native girls . . ."

As he hesitated, I made haste to say that my own knowledge was derived entirely from the works of Somerset Maugham. I did not enjoy a dispassionate contrast between Flavia and a native girl.

"I've always presumed the union to be a purely physical one," Hadleigh continued tranquilly. "No subtilities, no reserves. If the girl doesn't give *all* of herself to you, why, you feel you've made a bad bargain."

"And you feel you've made a bad bargain," I asked, "when your wife's a sophisticated white woman, nine-tenths mind and imagination?"

"Well, you're exasperated that you can't get at it all as quickly and as simply as with the native."

There followed a long silence in which I found myself gripping the arms of my chair and wishing that the doctor had not shewn me those photographs. Malaya was far enough away, but this bungalow on the fringe of the jungle or in its midst was not on any map that I could imagine. And Flavia was alone there, with a husband who felt she was a bad bargain.

"Am I to understand the whole thing's crashed?," I asked.

"The climate doesn't suit Flavia," Hadleigh began enigmatically; then, with a touch of impatience: "You

can't give out what's not in you to give ; and Flavia's first devotion and love were spent before she married. I'm sorry for Helston in a way, but he had fair warning."

"He should have stuck to his native girls," I said.

"Certainly, after he was married," the doctor agreed.

"Oh, *that* was it ? And what you have politely called 'the climate' . . ."

"When she comes home this year, I don't suppose she'll go back."

So Flavia was coming home, perhaps on her way now. I had expected to hear this when the doctor first told me that he needed my help ; but my immediate reaction had been to wonder how this would affect Dick. Now I began to wonder how it would affect me.

"Has she said where she proposes to live ?," I asked. "And how ?" A vague gesture intimated that, if Flavia cared to make her home with Hadleigh, she would always be welcome. "Has Dick any idea of all this ?"

The doctor shook his head, frowning, and stood up to look out of window in the direction of the "Big House".

"I don't intend to tell him," he answered.

"If you're right in thinking that he wanders off by himself, day after day, to all the places where he once went with Flavia . . .," I began.

"That's neither here nor there. For many reasons I think Dick should have a change of work and a change of scene. He's talked about it long enough, in all conscience. And that's where I want your assistance. I hope you'll be successful ; but, whether you are or not, I don't feel that Dick—or, rather, Felicity—has the right to pass a sentence of perpetual banishment on any one. Flavia's done all and more than all that could be expected of her in the way of atoning for her own good deeds. Now she's in trouble, she needs a place of refuge. If she's

uncomfortably near those two when she's here or in London, it will be their turn to clear out. I'm as fond of Dick as ever I was, Leslie, and I feel that in many ways he has never had a fair chance, but a good many of us have done our best and he must stand on his own feet now."

I thought of Dick as I had seen him in the last months before Felicity took him to America. Would she try to make life unbearable to him again? Would she succeed? Or was he now altogether too indifferent, too bored?

"I'll do what I can," I promised.

"Australia's waiting for a new governor-general," said the doctor. "You'd better get hold of the prime minister's principal private secretary. And, by the way, there's no time to waste."

4

I had said I would do whatever I could, but there seemed very little that I or any one else could do. For half-a-dozen years now I had been making Dick's name known and getting it better known in official quarters, but of late I had been met with the blunt question: Did my friend Alster really want a position of the kind I was always trying to secure? He was not doing much to push himself forward in the House of Lords; and once or twice, when some one sounded him tentatively, he seemed to be inextricably involved in one or other of the "various select committees" to which the *Who's Who* of this time bore witness.

I did not myself mind ploughing one more furrow in the sand; but, if I was to use my inconsiderable influence with people of importance, I had to be sure that Dick was not going to make fools of his backers at the last moment. Accordingly, on the morning after my talk with Hadleigh, I called at the "Big House" and invited

Dick to say whether he would accept the Australian appointment if it were offered him. As I expected, he retorted by asking sarcastically if the College of Cardinals was not just as likely to elect him pope.

"Well, you've now established a claim on official gratitude," I said. "You've gained tremendous experience, you're the right age and there's no difficulty about the children. Beatrice would have the time of her life as the governor-general's daughter; and you could take young Richard as an A.D.C. What d'you think?"

Dick stood up with a yawn and began to fill a red-leather despatch-box with papers. The top one, I saw, was inscribed "*Draft Report*"; and, as he slammed the lid of the box, I felt that he was sending one more unloved and unwanted enquiry to its grave.

"Truth to tell, I was looking forward to a bit of a holiday," he muttered, as we walked out into the sunshine. "I've just heard of a fishing in Ireland . . ."

"But you can't spend the rest of your life idling about . . ."

"If I had the summer there, I could come back to my committee-work . . . I don't want to stay down here. I certainly don't want to be in London for the season. Oh, if anybody offers me a job of this kind, I shall have to consider it. Common civility. But as I don't think there's the least likelihood . . ."

His attitude, I felt, was not encouraging; and I wondered whether I should have been more successful if I had approached Felicity first. As the question passed through my head, it was answered by Dick's saying that "they" had all been giving a good deal of thought to this subject.

"I suppose," he added a little contemptuously, "it would mean a G.C.M.G. and perhaps a step in the peerage. For those who care about such things . . ."

"Has any one in fact been putting out a feeler?," I asked.

"No. Roy Hadleigh thinks a change would be a good thing, but I can get all the change I need by going to Ireland . . . Let's walk up to the west wood. I want to shew you a bit of reafforestation I'm doing."

Australia, I felt, was being dismissed; and indeed it was not mentioned again until a week or two later when I was once more staying with the doctor and Dick walked down to say that he could give me a lift to London next day when he went up on certain business that he could not specify. Between these two meetings I thought a good deal over his phrase about the "change" he needed and could secure by going to Galway for a holiday. He had not consulted Hadleigh professionally and he had not been told that Flavia was on her way home, but he spoke as though he had been told to make himself scarce and as though he would be doing all that was required of him by going to Ireland. Had Flavia said anything?

I know now that she had not. Why, then, did Dick talk as though a few months' absence would suffice for some purpose that he was careful to leave undefined? The rational explanation is that, even if nobody in the village told him that Flavia was coming back, he argued with himself that a woman unused to the tropics would normally come back every other year. Is there any need to seek a less obvious reason for his very sensible determination to be out of the way until she was eastward-bound again?

I should not have said so if I had not motored with Dick from Marston to London and if he had not been so unaccountably on edge. The ostensible purpose of his journey, he now explained, was to call at the Speaker's House and discuss the composition of yet another select

committee. He had also to say before mid-night whether he wished to take an option on his Irish river. Finally—this was something that he must not reveal even to Felicity for the present—he had an appointment with a certain person who lived less than a hundred miles from Downing Street. He did not wish me to ask him any questions ; but he might tell me that, if anything came of the meeting, it would knock his precious committee on the head and in all likelihood leave him with a salmon-river that he could not use.

“That’s the way things *would* happen !,” he added with more petulance than the position seemed to justify.

I suggested, using the candour of old friendship, that what really irritated him was the knowledge that he had not made up his own mind.

“Still, you won’t have to give an immediate decision,” I added. “If you’d care to dine with me somewhere and talk things over . . .”

“I don’t know when I shall be free. And I certainly shan’t have time to dress,” he grumbled.

“I’ll wait for you at the club,” I said. “We can decide then where we want to go.”

“I can’t *promise* anything,” he answered ; and, when he dropped me at my chambers, I spent the rest of the afternoon waiting for a telephone-message to say that he had changed his mind.

Would history have been altered if in fact he had failed me ? I do not think so. Before the day was out, I had come to believe—for the time at least—in a fate that had brought him to London and inspired my invitation and perhaps led us to the amiable taxi-driver who soon took charge of our destinies. Dick arrived punctually enough, but in a mood of irritability, depression and general troublesomeness that I had not seen equalled in

the long years when he shared my flat in Whitehall Court. He had interviewed the Speaker and would be landed with another commission unless he cut the country. He had also seen the P.M. and, what was worse, the P.M. had seen him : this augured ill, as he had been suffering from an attack of nerves. His fishing ? Well, he had secured that, but there would quite certainly be no water in the river. When I suggested that we might think about dinner, he proceeded to find fault with every place I proposed. One was always too crowded, another too empty ; he hated dining underground and he would not eat to music if I paid him.

After twenty minutes of this, I warned him that his problem would solve itself by our failing to get a table anywhere. This roused him ; and we set out in a taxi, only to find that every corner of every grill-room was filled.

“ We can go back to the club,” I said somewhere between nine and ten.

By this time, our driver had entered into the spirit of the hunt ; and he now suggested that we should try the Ritz Grill-Room, from which he had noticed a good many parties leaving early for theatres.

“ A quarter of an hour more or less doesn’t matter,” Dick yawned, as though he were humouring me in a project predestined to failure. “ Is this our sixth attempt ? ”

“ At least,” I replied. “ If we can’t get in here . . . ”

There was one table vacant at this, our seventh and last venture. I waited to be told that the room was too crowded, the noise overpowering, or to be reproached for not remembering that Dick had said he could not and would not dine underground on a stifling June night. His captiousness, however, seemed to be exhausted ; and there was something like a note of apology in his

voice as he murmured that he had entirely forgotten this was Ascot week.

As we sat down, I noticed that Roy Hadleigh was within a yard of me, giving dinner to Flavia.

5

The odds against our meeting were, so far as I am concerned, incalculable. Hadleigh, also forgetting that this was Ascot week and omitting to reserve a table, had also been turned away from three restaurants; and this strengthened my queer feeling that something more than coincidence had brought us together. It would have been so easy for the one party or the other to have waited half-an-hour elsewhere, so easy for us to have gone back to my club, so much more probable that the one vacant corner here should have been at the other end of the grill-room.

As it was, we could not have timed our arrival more neatly or punctually if we had come on the doctor's invitation; and, observing the complete absence of surprise on the faces of Dick and Flavia, I felt that, though they had not arranged to meet and did not want to meet, they yet had expected to meet. To my talk of "fate" I am not going to add any talk of a "sixth sense"; but, when I remembered Dick's moodiness during the last few weeks, culminating in his suppressed excitement that morning, I could not help wondering whether some instinct had told him that she was drawing nearer, night and day.

"You'd better join us," said the doctor, signing rather grimly to his waiter that our tables were to be pushed together. "You up for long, Dick?"

"I intended to go back to-morrow," Dick answered.

"Well, this . . . really . . . Has your husband come with you?," he enquired of Flavia.

"No, he couldn't get away," she answered. "If I hadn't been rather seedy . . ."

"She's going to stay with me for the present," said the doctor, with the air of a man delivering an ultimatum. "Afterwards, when she's had time to turn round . . . She's not going east again, by the way. Now then, sit down, both of you! We'd got as far as Aden," he reminded Flavia, "and the man who inconsiderately died on board. Go on, my child!"

I think that I was the last to recover. Ever since Hadleigh told me that Flavia was coming home, I had been wondering whether I wanted to meet her, whether I could meet her, whether I could help meeting her. "So long as I don't *see* her . . .," I whispered, as I stared in spite of myself at the glowing hair and deep-set grey eyes. Perhaps she would not want to see me. Though I was sitting beside her, she directed her conversation at the other two; and it was only at the end, when we were all giving her news of Marston, that she lowered her voice to say something conventional about my parents.

"I didn't write . . .," she added with a little shrug; and I wondered whether she was reminding me that I had not written to tell her I was now independent.

"I knew I had your sympathy," I answered. "For a time I considered the question of blossoming out as a gentleman of leisure, but the new management wanted me to stay on with the paper. I'd got used to being in harness, too . . ."

"That's so easy to understand! I thought, when I went abroad, that I was making an entirely new start, but I soon discovered that one can't cut one's life in two."

If this meant anything definite, it meant that I should have achieved nothing by pursuing Flavia to Burmah, Siam, Cochin-China. It was impossible to forget in twelve months the preoccupation of twelve years. At the end of dinner, when the doctor proposed her health, I caught her looking quickly across at Dick as though she wanted to see how much he was drinking; she winced when I told her in all innocence that I had given up my flat on the score of its being too big for a bachelor; and once, when Felicity's name was mentioned, I seemed to feel a tiny shudder coming from the chair next to mine. No, wherever she wandered, her roots had remained in Marston.

And now she had come back for good.

"Yes, I'm taking her down in the morning," the doctor informed us again, once more with an air of challenge. "If you've any messages, Dick . . . ?"

"Well, I sent Felicity a telegram this afternoon to say she wasn't to expect me till she saw me. I had one interview with an exalted person this afternoon and I have another to-morrow. I don't know if anything will come of it. And in any event it's a dead secret at present . . ."

"From which," the doctor struck in, "I conclude it's something better worth your while than these everlasting committees. I wish you luck, Dick. Are you coming to me, Leslie, for this next week-end ?"

"It's not possible," I said. "My chief has convened a special meeting for Saturday. If you ask me to spend my summer holiday down there, though . . ."

As we went to get our hats, I begged Flavia to believe that I was not inventing excuses when I said I was engaged at the week-end.

"My dear, I always know when you're speaking the truth," she assured me. "Of course I understand !

I shall look forward to seeing you later. There's so much we have to talk about. You've changed very little! A *tiny* bit greyer . . ."

"You haven't changed at all," I said, "in appearance . . ."

"Or in my wardrobe," she broke in with rather a forced laugh. "All my European clothes are a hundred years out of fashion . . ."

"You've changed inside . . .," I heard myself saying.

"A hot climate *doesn't* suit me," she interrupted again, again uneasily. "You remember how energetic I always used to be . . ."

"I remember everything . . .," I began.

"I don't think I've changed . . ."

"My dear, my dear, as long as there's any question of *thinking*, you *have*."

For a moment I could not myself have said which of us had used those words, or when, or why. Then I remembered an afternoon, more than twenty years earlier, when I sat with Flavia on a bench in Regent's Park, telling her that I believed I now really did understand her attitude towards Dick. The mounting colour in her cheeks shewed me that she too remembered; doubtless she remembered the answer that I had quite unconsciously parodied: "*My dear, my dear, so long as there's any thinking about it, you don't!*"

"I *know* I've not changed," she corrected herself. "Unless you call *learning* a change . . ."

"You look as if you'd been in hell," I whispered, in spite of myself.

"And if I have? Perhaps it was good for me. You see so much more clearly afterwards. *Little* things don't frighten you any more. . . . Well, good-night, my dear, and good-bye . . . Unless I'm going to see you in the country?"

CHAPTER SIX

“GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF
AUSTRALIA . . .”

I

AS I have narrated on the well-informed authority of Sir John Bunting, Dick was fishing in Ireland when a rumour spread from Whitehall to Fleet Street and from a London dinner-table to the “cabinet room” at Risborough that a new governor-general had at last been chosen for the Commonwealth of Australia.

He was still there, though I saw no reason to disturb him, when I finished the two columns that I had promised to write against the day when the news of his appointment should—in my chief’s favoured phrase—be “released”; and he remained there day after day while I amused my leisure by reflecting on the contrast between *History as it is Written* and *History as it might be Written*.

By this time Roy Hadleigh had returned to Marston, taking Flavia with him; and the immediate effect of his arrival was to send Felicity post-haste to Richmond Terrace. It was more than twenty years, I reckoned, since she applied to me for news of Dick’s whereabouts; and, though she was engaged in the same quest now, she had acquired reserve and wariness in the interval. It was I who visited her this time, in response to a suggestion that I should accompany her to Wimbledon; and, though she did not even know where “Richard” was, she pretended to have heard the last details of the impending appointment. As on the previous occasion, I promised

to give Dick a message when next I saw him ; but it was not until next morning that I received a note in Bunting's own exclusive red ink to enquire whether my article met with Lord Alster's approval. After this, though I still knew no reason for disturbing him, I had no choice ; and that night saw me at Euston, reluctantly and fruitlessly bound for some almost unattainable destination in the wilds of Galway.

“ Fruitlessly ” I say, because I knew that, if Dick was going to accept the prime minister's invitation, he would accept every word I had written to help him get it. As a piece of journalism, the “ write-up ” fulfilled its purpose amply ; and, if I could enrich it with a photograph of Marston, another of the present owner and yet another of the exquisite Lady Alster under a yard of tulle and a hundredweight of diamonds, I should furnish my readers here and in Australia with a picture of everything that a governor-general designate ought to be. As we sat the next evening on a tumble-down bench outside the worst hotel in Ireland, Dick gave a complacent nod as he ticked off each item and yawned at the end :

“ Well, that's about all there is to say, isn't it ? Why didn't you post the damned thing ? ”

“ Bunting wanted me to discuss it with you,” I answered. “ As you can see, I've only been padding out what anybody would find in the ordinary books of reference.”

“ I'm afraid that, if you embroider it,” said Dick with a touch of self-importance that came near to pomposity, “ people wouldn't recognize me. And I don't greatly care for the ‘ personal note ’ in modern journalism,” he continued, with a grimace. “ If I keep white mice or perform on the 'cello, that's *my* affair. It would hardly have been playing the game if you'd made *use* of our friendship . . . ”

I was mildly amused, as always, to meet this conception of the press as a dutiful purveyor of news to which the public had a right and, simultaneously, as an unscrupulous censor of information unpalatable to the highly placed. It had evidently not occurred to Dick that he was using—perhaps abusing—my friendship many years earlier when he asked me to exert my “influence” in making his name better known; he was using—perhaps abusing—my friendship now to keep out things that may or may not have been other people’s business, but that profoundly affected the quality of the name I had to make known. At this moment, however, he was not in the mood to be chaffed. “I wonder if there’ll be any more peace in the next world” had been his hardly gracious form of welcome when I arrived; and, though he hastened to add: “For either of us, I mean”, I surmised that he would be thankful when I took myself back to England.

“I dislike the *trivially* personal note,” I said. “So much so that I haven’t told Bunting I even know you by sight. If I did, he would want something more highly seasoned than this stuff; and, if I didn’t supply it, he would turn on one of his bright young men. I should like something more human myself,” I continued. “If you contrast the living Dizzy that we know from the letters with the frozen Earl of Beaconsfield in Parliament Square . . . No one would ever suspect from this nonsense of mine that you had any blood in your veins.”

For a moment Dick stared uneasily at me as though I were an interviewer asking him to describe or invent endearing hobbies for gossip-loving readers.

“Does anybody *want* a real person for a job like this?,” he asked, handing me back my article and looking longingly at the river from which I had dragged him away. “Real in *your* sense, I mean?”

"By the time one's discovered that men and women are neither black nor white, but streaky, *yes !*," I answered.

Dick rose with a shiver, which he pretended came from the evening mist, and carried me off for a walk along the river-bank.

"I can't agree," he answered. "This modern exhibitionist mania . . . We've all of us done things we're ashamed of before we leave school. Perhaps before we leave our nursery. We go on doing 'em, saying 'em, thinking 'em all our lives. Part of what you'd call our streakiness. And things happen to us. Not necessarily discreditable in the sight of an all-wise god, but things we'd rather die than have known. You seem to argue that a man's not a real person unless it's all proclaimed from the house-tops. Unless he has a Day of Judgement once a month or a public confessional . . ."

A long silence followed. I thought it hardly worth while to protest that this was not at all what I meant.

"I don't see it, myself," he resumed abruptly. "I never see what good you do by trumpeting that a fellow who has done useful work is a secret drinker or a homosexualist. When he's dead, it's rather different. If in any sense he belongs to history. You want to see the man as a whole, the advantages he was born with and the stumbling-blocks he had to overcome."

I tried to suggest that a man who was making history belonged to history, but Dick swept on without regarding me :

"In his lifetime, you're lowering his dignity ; and that's lowering *him*. A friend of my father's—a great general in his day—was a thief. No two words about it. He just *couldn't* keep his hands off odd bits of old silver, you had to lock them up when he came to stay. Now, if you'd allowed a scandal while he was alive, you would have lost a good soldier and got instead just one more

petty pilferer, one more man with a kink for every one to snigger about, one more curious 'case' for the doctors to discuss. If I'm to go about in robes and stars, aping royalty, it doesn't help for any one to know I was once taken to Vine Street for knocking a bobby's helmet off on boat-race night. Your human figure, with blood in his veins . . ."

Dick broke off, with a grunt of impatience, after the longest speech that I had ever heard him deliver. Even now, when we were by ourselves, he remained impersonal under a carapace of reinforced steel ; and, though I might know that he had cheated and lied and run away and buried his face in the skirts of a woman, he preferred the false dignity of my panegyric to the dignity I could have given him as a man who had overcome his own weakness.

"I would sooner," I said, "be ruled by a man who only holds his own after a struggle than by some one who has never had any temptations to resist."

"Jolly for the feller to have it *known* he has a kink," Dick answered. "To feel that whenever he comes into a room . . . Look here, I shall see you at dinner. If you like to tell your precious chief that I approve . . ."

Without finishing his sentence, he turned and ran as though he would die if he could not get away by himself. Watching the lank, ungainly figure as it leapt and plunged, I felt that since infancy Dick could never have entered a room without remembering that he too had a kink, without wondering who else suspected it, without making every nerve and muscle taut to conceal it.

2

At dinner I asked how soon the appointment would be gazetted. My bag was packed and stood ostentatiously by the door ; my article had been flung, symbolically,

into a despatch-box; we were meeting no longer as a pressman and his victim, but as two friends.

"There's nothing to gazette," Dick answered brusquely. "I've been asked *informally* what my reply to a certain question would be if I were asked *formally*."

This was so well known to both of us that I wondered at Dick's emphasizing it. If the prime minister was unable, after all, to confirm his offer, if the king called for some one of greater distinction, my labours would be thrown away; and Dick would then have to solve for himself the problem which Flavia had solved for him when she muttered all those years ago: "I'm only one; and there are four of them." I was not prepared to be told that he was weakening at the last moment.

"You've let it be known that, if the offer's made, you'll accept it," I said, with memories of my chief's "informant".

"Subject to passing the vet., as they say in horse-coping circles," Dick returned. "You can crawl out of anything on the score of health."

"Not if you asked Hadleigh to cast you," I warned him.

"You think not? He can't have a high opinion of his own powers as the angel-with-the-flaming-sword."

It was the very tone in which he had snarled after Jimmy Wreyden's death and Flavia's disappearance: "They're hiding her damned well." Now, as then, I realized with helpless horror that he had not yet abandoned all hope of her.

"Hadleigh feels," I replied, "that a job of this kind really is worthy of your mettle. You've waited long enough, Heaven knows! This is the career your father had in mind for you when you went into parliament."

"And he's not here to see it! Perhaps it's as well. The shock would certainly have killed him, poor old boy.

The idiot child, you know," Dick went on with startling bitterness.

"If you don't want the thing now," I was stung into saying, "I don't know why you got all your friends to do propaganda for you all these years."

Dick smiled sourly and beckoned to the dingy waiter who at different times cleaned boots, washed cars and cultivated the kitchen-garden with uniform want of success. A bottle of old brown sherry was ordered as a stirrup-cup; and he invited me to drink, however late in the day, to his "career".

"I've certainly had to wait," he added, wiping his long moustaches. "Oh, life's a great joke, you know! If my father *were* alive now, he'd be so incredibly old . . . 'I'm going to be governor-general of Australia,' I should shout. 'Capital, capital,' he'd say. And then his mind would cloud over. Next day it would have all the charm of novelty. I'm like that, myself. When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I remember is that interview with the prime minister. I feel . . . well, as I've not felt since I was chosen to play for Oxford the first time. I say that I can't be altogether a failure. I think what fun it will be for Felicity, who may begin to feel that she hasn't been altogether a failure either. Then . . . O my God, one asks oneself if it's *worth* it. There was a letter this morning to remind me privately that, *if* it comes off, I must think about my A.D.C.'s and secretaries. That brought it home rather. A.D.C.'s! Salutes! Curtseying!"

In the course of my life as a journalist I have met some dozens of cabinet ministers. I cannot remember one who did not say, while in office, that any one might have his place and, when out of office, that he was thankful to be a free man once more. I have met a round score of

governors; and almost every one has told me that he would enjoy the work if it were not for the ceremony. Dick really seemed to mean it.

"Surely it's a convention, like any other," I said. " 'Your Excellency' or 'My Lord' . . ."

"Twenty years ago I should have lapped it up!" Dick broke in gloomily. "I can picture myself inviting the whole world to stay with me, just to see how magnificent I was. A form of inferiority-complex, I suppose: the lust for approbation . . ."

"Twenty years ago, you were too young . . .," I began before he could pursue this line of thought.

"And now I'm too old."

I reminded him that there was only a few months' difference between us; but he quoted me impatiently against myself as saying that age was a question of vision.

"When *you* discovered you were forty and a failure too, Leslie. So long as you can look forward, you're young. When you live solely in the past, though . . . What can I look forward to? Duty? I seem to have been doing my duty in various ways for a hell of a long time. Were we put into the world simply to do our duty? Like wheels in a machine? Is there no happiness if you don't chance to find it in doing your infernal duty? One's wife? You know too much ever to doubt that it would have been better if poor Felicity and I had never married. My children? They're *not* my children, not any part of me. I'm afraid of them, afraid of making them a part of me, afraid of becoming to them what my father became to me. When they were babies, I tried to keep them from falling into the fire, but I don't want to *influence* them. No, I can see a long vista of useful, dutiful, hopeless years. If I do the Australian job all right, I shall doubtless be offered something else. I may become a sort of

professional governor-general. . . . It's different for you, of course. I suppose you'll marry one of these days."

"You don't think I've left it rather late?," I asked.

"It was never really practicable before," Dick answered. "Is your scheme to motor through the night to Dublin and catch the morning boat? If so, you ought to be getting a move on."

3

I told Dick, as a matter of form, that I would gladly stay if he had anything to discuss with me; but I knew that, ever since he came to Ireland, he had been engaged in the severest struggle of his life and, if in fact it had ended a moment before when he drawled that I should marry some day, he would want more than ever to be left alone.

As I scoured the hotel for any one who would make me out a bill, I tried to follow the working of his mind since we parted at the door of the Ritz three or four weeks earlier. He had not seen Flavia since; but the hypersensitiveness which told him that she was once more coming into his orbit told him also that something had gone amiss with her. If Malaya was suffering from the world depression, she would normally have been the last woman on earth to desert her husband; and he must have put his own interpretation on Hadleigh's phrase about her "not going East again". When, therefore, he retired to "think things over quietly" in Ireland, he had to think of the position that would be created if Flavia settled in England, if she set herself free by divorce, if the Australian position were not offered, or if it were offered and refused. He was still thinking, before dinner, when he talked of "crawling out" on the score of health.

By the end of dinner he had made up his mind. For the

first time since he was a boy, he seemed to have grasped that, even if Flavia and he were free, there was no more hope for him than when they were both free before. Henceforth he would always live in the past ; and, until he was used to this, he wanted only to hide like a wounded animal.

"Let me know when you're back in London," I said, as I made ready to go.

"I expect I shall be pretty busy," Dick answered in the tone of one refusing alms to a professional mendicant.

"I should like to wish you good luck and all that sort of thing," I persisted.

"Oh, God, you'll have ample opportunities of that ! Ever since my name was mentioned I've been bombarded by interviewers and photographers and secretaries of the Antipodean Society and the Aborigines League and Heaven-knows-what-else. Every other one of them wants to give me a farewell dinner and to have a list of the people I should like asked. You'll be invited to at least half of them."

I promised to accept at least half of the invitations that I received ; and, as Dick was fidgeting for me to be off, I put on my coat and hat. Would he shake hands ? , I asked myself a little acidly, as he withdrew into the shelter of the hall and busied himself with a cigar-case. By now I hardly cared. Dick had disappointed me too deeply ; he never considered the havoc that he had made in other people's lives, it apparently meant nothing to him that he was saying good-bye to his oldest friend. If he thought of me at all, he thought of me as some one who might succeed where he had failed. Always and everywhere, now as in our earliest days together, he was engrossed in himself. I wondered, with what I can only call disgust, why so many people had for so long bothered about him.

Twenty-four hours after my arrival in London I discovered one reason.

In a letter that was for the most part as stiff and unbending as his normal speech, Dick wrote to thank me for my "obituary", as he grimly called it. He had hardly appreciated, in reading it, how difficult my task must have been: to eschew irrelevancies, to grapple with a mass of information that was really excessive and to deny myself a possible masterpiece of psychological portraiture in favour of a "fashion-plate"—to use my own term—that a man in the street would recognize.

"I stick to my guns," he continued, "over the value of reticence. When I am dead (by the way, you were wrong in one small detail, but I don't want it discussed: Hadleigh would be the first man to turn me down for this job if I got him to examine me!), you can say any blessed thing you like about me; but, while I'm alive and working under the eye of the public, I do favour the conventional mask. Even if I had secret virtues to set against my secret vices, the public expects an average, tall-hatted, frock-coated figure without either. I know I'm right about this. It would be equally distrustful if it heard that I took cocaine or wore a hair-shirt; either upsets the average for His Majesty's representative.

"I tried to express this, but it was too difficult for my halting tongue. And I was feeling stupid to-night. This business of looking back . . . Since you left, I've continued to live in the past, but I've discovered that it's not peopled by myself alone. I feel it's only fair to tell you that I become rather humble when I think how many others have been involved in my muddles (the Lord alone knows why they didn't find a better use for their good nature!) and when I remember how often I've said—to you especially—'I was wrong', only to go on in precisely the same way the next minute . . ."

As I read the familiar, curt confession, I felt that Dick was saying once more, but for the last time, but in respect of almost his whole life : "*I was wrong.*" He had tried to say it three days before and had run away, as he always ran away from danger and difficulty and unpleasantness. It was his secret vice. Now he had come back, as he always came back, with set teeth and a white face. It was his secret virtue.

To say that the combination was what made people "bother about" him would sound patronizing, but I can say that it was what made me love him.

4

I did not attend any of the farewell dinners that took place, at the rate of four or five a week, from the moment that Dick's appointment was announced. I received two or three invitations ; but the first came accompanied by a note begging me not to accept, as he hated to have his friends present when he was making a speech and it would be an anticlimax for us to go on saying good-bye when we had already said it in Ireland.

I soon discovered that others had been treated in the same way.

"*You must spare me a week-end,*" wrote Roy Hadleigh, "*when the 'Big House' is safely shut up (I don't think Dick wants any god-speeds). I gather you saw him in Ireland ; and Flavia tells me she can recognize your hand in the Morning Standard article. I didn't, but then I'm no judge of style. Nor did I recognize Dick ; and, though this sounds uncomplimentary, it's the highest praise I can give for what must have been an extraordinarily difficult job.*

"*I want to hear what you thought of him when you saw him in Galway. I've had a long letter, in which he hints that*

his inside's troubling him. As he appears to have mentioned this to you, I'm hardly committing a breach of confidence in saying that FitzGibbon, the big man on insulin, has asked me for a history of the years that Dick was in my care.

"Flavia is here and sends you her love."

I replied that I would come the moment I was told the Alsters had left Marston; and then, for the first time since our chance meeting at dinner, I allowed myself to think of Flavia's tone and expression as she whispered to me that she quite certainly had not changed. Unless I were greatly mistaken, she and I were also faced with the severest struggle of our lives; and I at least did not know how I wanted it to end.

I still did not know, a week later, when I drove down to Marston for my summer holiday. The doctor met me at his gate, pushed me at Flavia before either of us had time to become self-conscious and then led the way into his surgery, where he seated himself at his roll-top desk.

"This is between ourselves," he began, "but, since last I wrote to you, Leslie, I've heard from FitzGibbon. He says . . . But I should like to hear your version first."

As he began to hunt through his papers, I quoted Dick's statement that, if Hadleigh had examined him, he would have been kept in England.

"That's as may be," grunted the doctor. "He didn't consult me, fortunately, and he did consult FitzGibbon. FitzGibbon did try to keep him in England and, fortunately or unfortunately, he didn't succeed."

"I suppose," I said, "Dick felt he couldn't throw everything up at the last moment. And no doubt there are excellent doctors in a place the size of Australia."

"No doubt! No doubt! Whether he'll last out his term . . ."

"Is it a bad case?," asked Flavia.

"With care and proper treatment . . .," the doctor began confidently. "It means dieting, as you know. Whether he'll be able to rest himself as I should like . . . I agree with FitzGibbon that he'd have been wiser to postpone things, if he could. It'll be a bore for him and for the government if he has to come back at the end of two or three years."

I asked if the doctor could say when the disease first declared itself; but it seemed that Dick had not consulted him professionally since the war.

"And that's no doubt the reason," I suggested, "why he's not been to say good-bye. He didn't want to lie up and he doesn't want to be put off now that he's made up his mind at last. When I saw him in Ireland, he was beginning to feel that in the eyes of the world this was a not unsatisfactory conclusion to his career. He's being recognized at last. This is an effective answer to Felicity and his brothers and all the people, like my excellent chief, who regarded him as a dull mediocrity, the shadow of a great name. We, who know him better, may feel that his career was good enough without any spectacular finish."

The doctor hunted again through his papers and drew out a newscutting which I recognized at once as my *Morning Standard* article.

"You've certainly done your best for him," he said.

"I could have done much better if he had let me," I answered, "but that was the version he approved. You yourself said you didn't recognize him . . ."

"Because you played him so much above the strength of his hand. Like a man who calls his village shop 'The International Stores'. Fond as I am of Dick, I can't see anything to justify this gush. A 'blue' many years ago, a D.S.O. . . . That's *all*. The better we know poor Dick, the more we must write him down a failure. If he

hadn't a title and a rich wife, he would never have wangled his present job."

I looked across to Flavia, who was leaning against the arm of the doctor's chair and gently shaking her head.

"You say this was the version Dick approved," she reminded me. "Do you mean there were others?"

"Only in my head. As I told Bunting, the same set of facts will yield half-a-dozen different interpretations according to the way you stress them. If I'd wanted to crab Dick... If I'd merely drawn attention to all the things that the works of reference left out or glossed over..."

Hadleigh looked across at me with eyebrows quizzically raised.

"All the things?," he repeated. "I should have thought only the Recording Angel could have done that."

"Well, enough to make *you* feel that Dick was very far from being a failure."

"And this," the doctor muttered, in almost the words that I had used a few weeks earlier to the editor-in-chief of the *Morning Standard*, "is the way you journalists make history."

"I would rather say," I answered, "that the public makes its own history: a different brand in each different generation. Almost my first memory on this planet is connected with this house of yours. My father brought me here when I was three..."

The doctor nodded slowly and screwed up his eyes to recreate a scene which I dare swear he had forgotten for more than forty years: my father, in white tie and shovel hat, grasping a *Daily Telegraph*, my mother with a shawl thrown hastily over her shoulders, the servants of both houses clustering by the door and, a moment later, Lord Alster reining in to ask if "it" was true and to say that the morning papers had not yet reached him.

“ You came to tell me that Khartoum had fallen and Gordon was dead.”

“ Yes ! Well, there was a conventional history of the Khartoum disaster, a conventional picture of Gordon, which the writers of the day crystallized in a form that lasted more than twenty years. Cromer’s *Modern Egypt* gave us a rather different Khartoum and a very different Gordon. Then, about ten years later, Lytton Strachey gave us a different Gordon again.”

“ If Strachey had published his study in ’85, I believe he’d have been lynched,” murmured Hadleigh.

“ Because the public wasn’t ready for any other aspect of its hero-martyr. So, in a very small way, with my ‘ Portrait of His Excellency ’. The public’s not ready yet for the picture that you and Flavia and I could paint.”

“ I wish you would,” said Flavia.

I stood up and strolled to the window. In the road at the bottom of the garden the first of the evening patients were beginning to collect ; and I could see the doctor preparing to send us away.

“ Some one would have to explain, for a start,” I said, “ something that’s puzzled me ever since I can remember. Dick’s not a man of impressive personality ; but all his life, for some reason, he’s been the sun and every one else has been a satellite. We’ve thought and talked and agonized, for him and about him. Unless I could make my readers see why we had all *bothered* . . .”

5

A long silence followed ; and then Hadleigh, with a gesture of scorn, threw my “ appreciation ” into his waste-paper basket.

“ Dick was my patient from the time I brought him into the world,” he expounded, “ and I’ve tried ever since

to iron out a few of the twists that his high-minded parents gave to his wretched young spirit. They *fussed* him. I didn't succeed, but that's *my story*. Not being a journalist, I shan't embellish it. '*For the next two years Lord Alster devoted himself whole-heartedly to the problems of currency-reform . . .*' Bah!"

Opening the door, he thrust us into the hall and I found myself alone with Flavia for the first time since the night when she dined with me in Whitehall Court and discussed whether she would do any good by talking to Felicity about Dick's rapid and alarming deterioration. Since then she had drifted from Burmah to Siam and from Cochinchina to Malay, ending—as she imagined—on the fringe of the remotest jungle, but discovering before she had been there a month that her wanderings were not yet over. I had expected, by daylight, to see wrinkles and hollows, perhaps a ruined complexion and certainly a touch of grey in her radiant hair; but, as we turned into the garden, she looked as slim and young as in the days when she came out of the dispensary to smoke a cigarette with me between surgery-hours.

"And you, Flavia?," I asked.

With lips compressed, she nodded once in the direction of Rose Cottage and then, still without speaking, pointed to the high beech-woods on the chalk downs commanding the village. It was indeed unnecessary for her to speak: she had seen Dick going through the same hell as her father, eternally fighting a losing battle with himself.

"Once I'd started . . .," she murmured at last, as we left the garden. "You see, I was the only person he confided in. To drop right out, as you advised . . . I know now it *would* have been kindest in the long run, but I felt it was my *fault* that he'd come to depend on me so much."

"Why wouldn't you marry him?" I asked.

In the old days her answer had always been that she was not in love with him; but, since last we walked alone on these windy slopes, she had married Helston without being in love with him.

"Because I always wanted to marry you," Flavia replied. "For one reason. I *couldn't*, as you know to your cost, and I doubt if you'll ever understand. Yet it's a thing *men* do; marrying girls they don't want, giving up girls they do, because they've got entangled and would rather let *themselves* down . . ."

"I understand all that," I said, "but you *didn't* marry him."

Though neither of us, I think, had seen where we were heading, we had come to the place where I first proposed to Flavia nearly thirty years before. The hand of the forester had pressed heavily on the older trees, but Dick had been busy with his new planting and in a few years my favourite window looking down on Marston village would be blocked. By that time, Flavia and I should not be here to use it; and Dick's son, pointing from the terrace of the "Big House", would perhaps be explaining that this wind-break was his father's handiwork.

"I came near it," said Flavia, "though it would have been letting you down and letting myself down. Dick couldn't go through life, though, leaning on me. You want a nurse to be gentle with a sensitive child, but you don't want the child to insist on keeping his nurse when he's grown-up. When Lord Alster said I encouraged Dick to think about himself too much, he was quite right. And when he said I was turning his mind from his work . . . He was so insanely in love with me physically . . . Your turn now, Leslie!"

The fallen tree on which we had once sat had long since

been hauled to the saw-mill; but the stump remained and I led Flavia to it.

"If you're afraid of anything," I said, "you should never admit it. Snakes . . . Or great heights . . . or ghosts. If you do, you're giving a handle to a possible enemy who may some day get you at his mercy by luring you to the edge of a precipice or a haunted room. If you're obviously afraid of *people*, why, every errand-boy can insult you, every tramp take your watch."

A slight lift of her eye-brows suggested that Flavia was wondering if at last I had come to see that Dick's first impulse was always to run away.

"Without a general reputation for fearlessness," I continued, "a man pretty well forfeits the right to live. I believe the thing that's made me put up with Dick is the thought that all the while he's been fighting for his life. And he's *won*. The doctor may call him a failure; it's nonsense! If Dick had let me put in all that you and I know, all we suspect . . ."

"And you don't regret it?," she asked.

Before answering this, I allowed my thoughts to play for a moment over my latest and last meeting with Dick in Ireland. Hope was dead; and, though he might survive another thirty years, in a sense life was over. Would he have been any worse off without Flavia, remaining in the Guards and going to the front in August rather than December? Would it have mattered if he had drunk himself to death or if he had cut his throat to escape Felicity's tongue? Had it ever mattered, since Flavia refused to marry him, whether he lived or died?

"He's saved his soul alive," I said, "so we mustn't complain that he and you and I have lost the whole world. What are you going to do with yourself, Flavia? The doctor talked about your living here while you looked round . . ."

"He's pressing me to get a divorce, but I don't know if I want it. I've not been a great success," she sighed, "either with men that I refused to marry or with the man that I actually married . . ."

"You were never in love with Dick; and you were never in love with Helston. Why did you marry him, Flavia?"

Many minutes passed before she could bring herself to answer:

"He wanted me. . . . And I was so desperately lonely. Lost, too. I wondered if I should ever see England again. And I thought he understood. How very little I had left to give, I mean . . ."

Out of the past I heard a voice gravely explaining that some one else had very little to give. It was my own voice; and I was trying to explain Dick to Felicity. A later voice, that of Roy Hadleigh, muttered impatiently that Helston was reaching out for something that Flavia had already dedicated for all time.

"Tell me this," I said. "When my people died . . . Hadleigh urged me to go out, but I felt it would be useless. We'd become a habit to each other, I said. Until something occurred to break it . . . If you'd wanted me, I felt you'd have told me . . ."

"I *wanted* you badly enough!", Flavia whispered.

"Then why, in God's name . . .?", I began.

"My dear, my dear, it was too late! You still think of me as the girl you played with, but that was twenty-five, thirty years ago. I was too old to begin having children. It wouldn't have been fair . . ."

"And that was the only reason? When it was you I wanted? When I'd wanted all those years? And I thought we'd drifted so long, so wretchedly, that nothing but an earthquake . . ."

"I've had the earthquake now," she broke in with a shudder.

"But at that time you would have said 'no', even if I'd come out to you?"

"I should have tried to . . ."

"Will you say that now? You needn't remind me that you still have a husband."

"But you *can't* still want me, my dear!"

"You know I do! You know I always have and always shall."

I heard a gentle sigh; and Flavia walked to a gap between the beeches through which we could see the blinded windows of the "Big House" glinting in the last rays of the setting sun. The doors were shut and only one chimney sent up a rare spiral of smoke; but she watched in fascination as though she half expected to see Dick coming to her.

"I can't think of anything," she muttered, "until His Excellency is out of the country. I've rather lost my nerve. 'His Excellency!' It's not too bad, Leslie. If he's made an earl at the end . . . *We* can take some credit for that. And I *do* so want to feel it hasn't all been a hideous waste! . . . Perhaps he was *worth* waiting for. You talked to-day as though you had at last seen what I saw all the time. And you *do* understand . . . about me . . . He's a greater man than all his swashbuckling ancestors."

"And some day, perhaps, we may try to prove it . . . So you were lonely, too, Flavia? . . . Dick says I may write what I like when he's dead, though we'll hope that won't be yet awhile. . . . A portrait of his Excellency as *we* know him . . . Even though the results are never published . . . Even though nobody else would recognize him if they were."

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Historical

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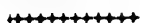
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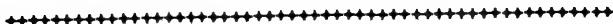
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